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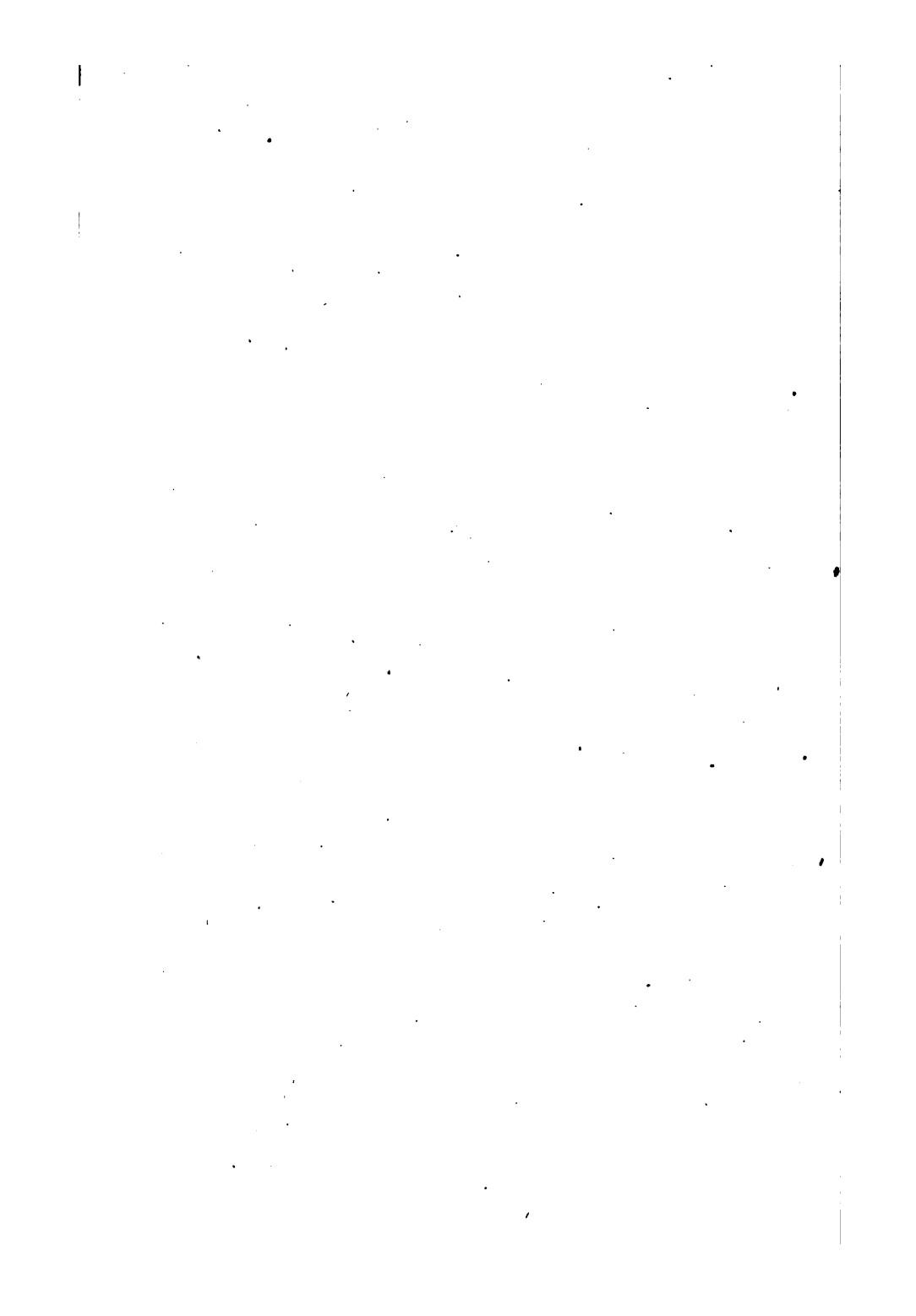
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LOVE ME, OR LOVE ME NOT

THE NEW NOVEL.

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LOVE ME OR LOVE ME NOT

BY

MRS. FRANCIS G. FAITHFULL

IN THREE VOLUMES

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LOVE ME, OR LOVE ME NOT.



CHAPTER XII.

'Who bursts his birth's invidious bar,
And makes by force his merit known.'

MARK walked on aimlessly for some time after he had left Freda, and then, suddenly turning northward, he retraced his steps towards Hamelford. At the milestone where Freda and Lottie had halted awhile ago he too halted now. The bitter smile had left his lips, but they were blanched and compressed with some passionate feeling. His eyes, no longer brightly defiant, were fixed blankly on the road before him; but he saw nothing, was conscious of nothing but his own inward questionings.

‘Yes! I will get to the bottom of it. The old woman may be able to tell me something. Perhaps I shall be better when I’ve heard *how* it came about.’

And, with a sigh wrung from his very heart and telling of an anguish there past words, he resumed his course.

Miss Morton was in the middle of a geography lesson when a tread sounded on the path outside, and the door-bell rang out sharply. She had not time to catch more than a glimpse of a man’s figure, but she recognised the step, the impetuous pull, instantly; and the stick with which she had been indicating Africa on the great chart slipped from her fingers to the ground. Yet she was not, like Freda, taken by surprise, for she had been looking with fear to this visit for some weeks back. She had not thought it would come about so soon. That was all. Well, there was the more reason to be glad that she had gone on the safe tack, and had got Freda out of the way whenever she could. It

just occurred to her that she might make the children an excuse for avoiding the encounter; but, after all, it would only be staving off the evil day. Better to get it over now at once. All this passed through her mind in the minute that elapsed before she had carefully shut to the parlour door and sat down face to face with Mark. She wanted to look comfortable and at her ease; but, try as she might, she could not quite control the nervous movement of her head, or compose the hands that were restlessly fingering her apron-strings. These signs of disquiet were lost on Mark, however. He saw none of them; he hardly even saw her.

'So she is going to be married.'

That was his opening speech, without any previous greeting.

'Yes, she is. I should have let you know, but I had forgotten where to write.'

If she had spoken truth, she would have said that she had meant one and the same letter to convey the news of the engagement and the marriage.

'I told you where I should be found,' he rejoined sternly. 'I put it down myself.'

'I know you did, but I mislaid the bit of paper somehow. It could have made no sort of difference, though.'

'Tell me about it,' he said, with an almost savage impatience. 'I want to know how long it has been going on.'

'Ever since Christmas, I fancy; though I knew nothing of it till quite lately.'

'Who is this fellow—this Redgrave?'

'He lives at Hawkstone. He farms his own land. His little sister has been living here through the winter.'

'And you—you know the promise you made me when I was last in this room. Did you keep it?'

'I did.'

She had no qualm in telling him that lie. Her one care just then was to screen herself from a wrath which might, she felt, be very terrible.

'She had it, then,—the note I left?'

'Yes! she had it; but it was no use.'

You would have known that if you could have heard her speak of you.'

'What did she say?' he asked, in a low unsteady voice.

'She said that she wasn't near as fond of you as she used to be, and that it was much better you should be away up in Scotland than here in Hamelford.'

'When did she tell you that?' he demanded, huskily.

'I can't rightly remember the day, but I think it was just after Lottie Redgrave came here,' she returned, steering cautiously along her perilous way. 'And so I said she'd best read what you'd written for her.'

'Well?'

'She didn't tell me what she thought of it. She never was apt to tell me things. Only, one day soon afterwards, she said she didn't care a pin's head about you. Those were her very words.'

'Did she say why?' He spoke like a man who had been running hard, and had no breath to spare.

'She only said you'd grown surly. But she knew Mr. Redgrave then; and I might have put two and two together, perhaps, if I'd been more wide awake. He is a gentleman, and a fine scholar too, and she thinks a deal, nowadays, of book-learning.'

Mark shivered. She was quick to see that her blow had gone home, and to follow it up.

'I've thrown in a word about you now and again, but lately she has taken offence at the very sound of your name. Not long ago she told me she would be off, bag and baggage, if I so much as talked of her marrying you.'

So she spoke, skilfully working into the black web of falsehood a single thread of truth.

Mark's head was bowed, and his brown work-hardened hands shaded his face.

'If I had not been here—if I had not known it for *certain*,—I should have said it *could* not be true,' he murmured, as if thinking aloud. 'I did say so, over and over again, last night. I had been so sure. I thought I'd reason to be. Fool

that I was ! I wonder,' he went on, still in the same low brooding tone,—' I wonder how it would have been if I'd never gone on that accursed voyage. She did care for me then, no matter what she says. If she were to deny it a thousand times, I should still know it as surely as that I'm sitting here.'

He broke off for a minute, and then went on in a hoarse whisper—

' I trusted her as I did myself. I thought we knew each other's hearts so well that I could bear to wait, since it was best for her. When I asked you to stand my friend, it seemed to me almost like throwing words away ; there could be such small need of any friend between us two ! Little I guessed !' and his words died away in a sort of groan.

All at once he looked up again fiercely.

' Why didn't you write and tell me how it was ? Why didn't you give me a chance ?'

' I tell you I couldn't write,' she retorted ;

'and if I could, what should I have had to say but that she didn't favour you? I knew no more than the babe unborn what was to happen, till she walked in and told me straight out she was going to marry Mr. Redgrave. She kept it dark enough till then. I gave her your letter. What more could I do, I should like to know?'

'Ah, well! it makes no odds now,' he said wearily; and then he lapsed into a heavy silence.

'You have come back sooner than you meant,' Miss Morton observed presently, moving restlessly in her chair.

She was longing to dismiss him, and yet dreaded to show any impatience of his presence.

'Ay!' he said, drawing himself up as if gathering his strength together. 'The waiting had been sorely hard, and I saw my way pretty plain to a berth I'd been hoping for. I meant to have bided till I'd made sure of it; but a kind of panic took me. I couldn't rest night nor day for thinking

of her. I couldn't do my work like a man. I believe,' he added in an under-tone, 'I have *felt* somehow what was going on here. So I put up my kit, and came away to woo her, and wed her, and take her back with me to the North. The smack couldn't sail fast enough for me, I was so mad to be here. Well,' breaking off into a grim laugh, 'I might have saved myself the journey. All I've got to do now is to go back again.'

He stood up, and she followed his example. It was in her mind to ask him neither to reproach nor question Freda, but she dared not risk that petition. His next words quieted her anxiety.

'What's passed between us now needn't go further,' he said, harshly; 'you'd have heard nought of it if I hadn't been bent on knowing how—no one will ever hear of it again; before night I shall have turned my back on Hamelford for good and all.'

He held out his hand moodily, then broke afresh into that forced unmirthful laugh.

'Can't you give me good-speed as you did before? Can't you wish me a pretty young bride before the year is out? I mean to look for one, I promise you.'

'I'm sure I wish—I hope,' stammered Miss Morton. Then regaining her naturally staid manner, she went on,—'I'm sure I hope you'll recover from this disappointment, and do well.'

'Recover!' he echoed, bitterly. 'Oh yes, I shall recover! Men don't die of these things.'

And then he turned him about, and, leaving her there, swung out into the street.

But she sat down again in her arm-chair, for her knees were trembling beneath her.

'I kept my counsel—I kept my counsel,' so ran her hurried thoughts. 'And I told him gospel truth too. She never did care for him; but she might have come to fancy she did. Girls take such strange whims into their heads sometimes. He'll soon be out of the way, and Stephen Redgrave's the best match she could have made in all the country-side.'

There was no remorse, no shame in her heart, only relief that she was so well rid of him. To her had come the worst Nemesis that can follow on ill-doing. She had ceased to know good from evil; she had learnt to believe in her own lies.

Mark did not linger in the High Street, but turning sharply up a narrow alley soon gained a by-lane, which would bring him by a short cut up again on to the open moor. At a baker's shop on the outskirts of the town he halted, and entering bought a roll of bread. He had tasted no food since his mid-day meal the day before, and he was growing faint with hunger. Slipping it into his pocket he set forth again, and soon he was on the moor, and climbing upwards, not by the beaten tracks but by the least-frequented paths, and then over broken stones and shale, and through the thick prickly furze which clothed the hill-side. With a blind reckless speed he hurried on until he gained the highest point, the beacon on St. Mary's Head. There he sat

down to eat his bread, and, if he could, to think calmly, steadily. Hitherto his mind had been unable to fix itself clearly on any one idea. All had been to him like some hideous nightmare, since his old schoolmate Frank Ribley had said to him jestingly upon the pier—

‘Of course you’ve heard of the fine match your old sweetheart Freda Chace is going to make?’

He had managed to strangle the cry that rose to his lips, he had even forced those lips to frame some brief questions, but it was more than he could do to control his gasping breath, or command the colour that suddenly forsook his cheeks. Even scatter-brained Frank guessed at once that he had better have held his thoughtless tongue. That had happened last night within five minutes of Mark’s landing, and what he had done with himself afterwards he could not well have told. He remembered finding his way to the ‘Jolly Mariners,’ for it was close on midnight, getting a shake-down there, and

lying for hours in his clothes on a hard bed in a dark stifling little room, tossing from side to side, courting the sleep that would not come. He remembered the red light of the dawn faintly colouring the eastern heavens, and he knew that long before the sun had risen he had been up and making for the moor, where no one was likely to disturb him, where he might at least breathe freely. He wondered now vaguely how long he had been lying under that great rock where Freda had found him. It might have been months, gauged by the torrent of confused and torturing thoughts that had swept across his mind. But now he had seen her, and must try to face his great woe and grapple with it, to take in the full sense of that one fact which made a desert of his whole life.

'Freda is to be another man's wife; not mine—never mine.'

He had been saying it over and over again inwardly, till the words seemed to grate upon his ears; but even yet he could hardly

grasp all that they meant for him. Ever since he could remember anything, Freda had been, as it were, the very essence of his pleasures and his projects. He had never even imagined a future of which she would not form a part. Long before thoughts of love or marriage had ever crossed his brain, he had looked on to the days when they should have grown together into man and woman ; when he should come back from his voyages to find her watching and wishing for him at home, proud of his success, sharing his joys, his troubles. He had been content with this ; he had hardly looked further into his own heart, until a rough taunt uttered in Hamelford street by an angry man had worked on him with magical power. When he had turned his back upon half-t tipsy Dick Miller, and had overtaken Freda that summer night two years ago, a new feeling had sprung into life within him, making his pulses throb with a keen excitement not altogether joyful. For mingled with the exultant thought that

he might be something more than friend, better than brother to her in the days to come, was a tremulous dread of injury to her now, an intense absorbing care for her welfare and her good report. No man should have a right to gibe at her, to bandy her name about lightly as that young fellow had just now dared to do. For her sake he had held his hand and let the insolent speech pass unpunished, rather than make her the subject of a street brawl ; and for her sake, in the silence of that same night, he had vowed inwardly to achieve a far harder conquest over himself, even to forswear her sweet companionship until such time as he could seek it without bringing any shadow of harm to her. He would whisper nought of this deep love of his ; he would in no way bind her to him until all men should be ready to own that he was in some sort worth a woman's having. And then, when he should have done what he could to blot out his inherited disgrace, when he should have cleared his way to an honest

honourable future, *then* he would come and claim his beloved.

And part, at least, of his vow had been well kept already. Away up at Greenock there was a little cabin-boy who owed his life to Mark, and after it came to be known that he it was who had jumped fearlessly into a wild sea at the first cry of ‘Man overboard !’ people forgot to ask much more about him, or, even if they chanced to hear that he was a felon’s son, were not unwilling to consort with him. And being expert and active at his trade, and more than ready for any work that came to hand, he had no lack of good employment. Moreover, the vague promises of advancement which had lured him back to the North, and which he had been pledged to keep secret, were nearing their fulfilment, and another month or two would see him third-mate of a fine vessel. Yes ! he had made a fair name for himself ; he could give his wife a comfortable home. And now, what did it matter whether he were honoured or disgraced, rich or penniless ? What mattered

to him any single thing in all this desolate earth? While he had been toiling and striving, another man had stepped in and borne off his treasure. A sickening pang came with the thought of this unknown enemy. He tried to imagine him—the fine gentleman of whom Frank had spoken to him—tried to recall whether he had ever heard his name before, whether he could ever have chanced to set eyes on him.

But he was growing faint and drowsy now. He had scarcely closed his eyes for eight-and-thirty hours, and hard travelling and misery had worn him out at last. Gradually his head dropped forward on his crossed arms, and he fell into the blessed forgetfulness of sleep. He must have slumbered long, for the afternoon sun was beating fiercely on his head when he awoke with a dull stupefied sense of pain and exhaustion. His practised eye told him by the shadows that it must be somewhere about five o'clock. Four hours more before the smack for Bristol would set sail—four long hours to drag through before he could get away.

He dared not go back into the town ; he shrank like a coward, bold fellow though he was, from encountering the glances and questions of any acquaintance he might meet, even from seeing the familiar Hamelford faces. And then suddenly, as he stood up stretching himself listlessly uncertain whether to turn, a strange contradictory desire seized him, urging him to find his way to Hawkstone, and have one look at the house where she would soon be living, before he bid good-bye to those parts for evermore. He should never be near it again. He would go now, while he could. Perhaps he might believe it better, get used to it sooner, if he had seen the very walls which even now held her and her fine lover. Not that he had forgotten the place ; he remembered, better than Freda, the lane, the old oak-tree, and the grey gables, as he remembered every haunt of their childish days. But he wanted to see it in its new ghastly light, he wanted to drive in the dagger to the hilt, to swallow the poison to the dregs. He did not stop to think twice.

He was in the mood when any momentary impulse had a strong ascendancy over him, and he started off at once, careless of the line he chose, forcing his way as before through thick-growing brambles, and leaping the low stone walls which here and there intercepted his path, but always with his face set towards Hawkstone.

It was a longish walk, but in less than an hour he had reached a grassy shoulder of the moor sloping downwards straight to the ivy-covered wall of the farm-buildings. He had come upon them at the back, and the quaint irregular house lay almost at his feet. No matter, he should get a nearer survey of it so. He stood for a minute or two, taking in the whole scene; the high slated roof; the gay flower-garden; the green meadows with the cattle grazing peacefully therein; the church, and handful of white-walled cottages beyond; and then, scrambling down the steep hill-side, he reached a rough stone stile that led over the low wall into the woodyard behind the house. It was a quiet

lonesome spot, for the path leading thitherward was little used, and the great ferns and bushes had almost overgrown it. There, resting against the broad step, he let his eyes wander hungrily over the latticed casements, the pointed gables of her home that was soon to be. He fancied her leaning out of one of those upper windows, as he had often seen her lean out of the school-room window down at Hamelford when he had come into the little front-garden. He fancied her training those climbing yellow roses on the western wall as she used to train the jessamine that grew about his grandmother's cottage window. He tried to picture her presence everywhere, courting each sharp spasm. Truly it was a pleasant dwelling, and tempting to the eye. If he could have brought her home to such an one, if he could have bestowed on her flocks and herds as this man could do, would she have held faithful to him then? Ay, no doubt; for such was the way of women all the world over. No woman that was ever born was

worth an honest man's love. So he said, bitterly, grinding his teeth meanwhile in his mad fruitless self-torment. No one came to disturb him. The birds twittering in the leafy boughs overhead, the rabbits scuttling in and out of their holes in the bank, the swarms of insects darting hither and thither in the still air, these were the only witnesses of his great suffering. At last he had seen enough; he had burnt in upon his mind the fair summer landscape, which was to him more dreadful than the wildest tempest that he had ever watched at sea blowing up from the windward quarter. And now he turned to go. But he did not mean to follow the line by which he had come; he would make his way instead round to the great old oak under which he and Freda had munched their bread-and-cheese when they were children together. So he skirted the old wall for awhile, and then struck through a copse where there used to be famous nuts, in olden times, for anyone daring enough to

gather them, and so on into a deep green lane that would bring him out just beside the oak.

He had no fears as to a chance encounter with Freda or her lover. His mind was wrought up now into a mood altogether beyond any fear. Once beneath the tree he cast himself down on the mossy network of gnarled roots that had broken through the light soil. There, with his chin resting on his hands, he conjured up the vision of a little dark-eyed girl in a brown hat and blue print frock, who had sat exactly where he lay some ten years ago. He could hear again her gleeful laugh as he poured into her lap the golden flowers for her cowslip ball ; he could see her drinking out of the tin mug he had carried in his pocket and filled at the neighbouring spring ; he could feel the quick clasp of her hand when some bird or rabbit rustling in the brushwood hard by startled her with a panic of old Roger and his bull-dog. Yes, that time with all its memories was his own ! his own !

Stephen could not meddle with it. She might forget it. She had forgotten everything; but she could never rob him of it. 'It *had* been,' so he said to himself with a savage satisfaction, 'the time when he was all the world to her, and Stephen nothing.'

He gloated over it—the one poor rag of consolation left him—scorning himself all the while. Well, he would hold it fast for this one hour, and then cast it away; trample it under foot with all the rest. So his mind travelled back, recalling the gentle loving ways, the gleaming smiles, the wistful glances of the little playmate, whom all his life long he had loved better than any earthly thing. He had been rough to her often, impatient and imperious as his manner was, but none the less would he have gone through fire and water to spare her from pain, or save her from danger; and she had known it. She knew it now. So, ever in a circle, his thoughts wandered back to the woeful present. The heat of the day was past, and the cool evening air began

to fan his burning brow. The golden sunlight cast a flickering light through the trees upon the turf around him. The birds were seeking their nests ; the farm-labourers, going home from their daily work bundle in hand, had all tramped by long ago. It was time for him too to be moving, if he meant to be in Bristol by the next day.

Slowly and wearily he rose ; slowly and wearily he began his march down the deep stony lane. Yet he halted once again at a white field-gate to take a last look at Hawkstone. There it stood, amid its pasture-lands and corn-fields backed by the purple moorlands, all bathed in the rosy evening glow. He could hear the distant cawing of the birds in the rookery behind the house ; he could even see figures moving in the flowery garden. It was too far off to distinguish faces ; but that white dress gleaming among the dark shrubs and tall hollyhocks might well be hers. He was straining his eyes trying to recognise the height, the well-known movements, when the

sound of footsteps approaching from behind fell on his ear. He did not stir. He did not choose to meet the inquisitive stare of some chance passer-by ; and he leant on still, his arms resting on the top bar of the gate, looking out eastward, and almost screened from view by a big drooping blackberry bush. The steps came on slowly, silently, the steps of two people moving leisurely along. They were just passing him when some involuntary impulse made him look over his shoulder, and at the same moment he too was seen. For the second time that day Freda's heart seemed to stop beating, and her feet were rooted to the ground. But whatever she might be, he at least was to all outward seeming collected enough. Her presence changed his humour instantly and utterly, filling him with a bitter scorn intensified sevenfold now by the sight of her companion ; and this same scorn, for the time, lulled his anguish, and inspired him with an unnatural calmness. Perhaps there had even been

lurking in him, half unconsciously, some vague expectation of seeing her again somehow, somewhere, some desire to show that he did not shrink from meeting her. But, whether this were so or not, he was at least possessed by a desperate determination to play his part well before this trim, triumphant suitor ; to hide his terrible wound by any means he might. So he turned round at once, and, sauntering forward with the self-same hard smile that his face had worn that morning on the moor, addressed Freda with an almost insolent bluntness.

'I daresay you didn't much look to meeting me again, but I've been amusing myself wandering about here and there.'

'I thought you told me you were going ?'

she rejoined, with slow distinctness.

'Ay, presently ; but I'd some hours to spare, and I'd a fancy for seeing these woods and fields again. I used to have good sport here once upon a time snaring hares and rabbits.'

She looked at him in an amazement that

for the moment almost overcame her indignation. It was true, and she had not forgotten it, that once or twice when he was but a young lad he had been tempted out hither for a poaching lark. But long before he was fourteen he had grown heartily ashamed of his share in such unlawful frolics—so much ashamed, indeed, that she used to be careful never to allude to them. And now, now that he was come to man's estate, he spoke of them with no sign of the old feeling, but rather with a boastful exultation. And this before Stephen, to whom a poacher was a rogue of deepest dye. She did not discern—how should she? —that it was for Stephen's ear that speech was made, that Mark was panting with a great longing to throw down the glove, and set her lover and his opinion at defiance.

They were a strange contrast those two. The one broad-shouldered, fair-haired, well-clad in his brown velveteen jacket and leather gaiters, with health and prosperity written in his fresh complexion and serene blue eyes.

The other younger, of slighter build, with restless dare-devil expression already stamped upon his far handsomer features, with his sailor attire disarranged, and with an indescribable recklessness in his whole bearing. A strange contrast, as Freda could not but see as her eyes turned from Mark to her betrothed. And for her—what did Mark see in her, as he stood there facing her in the slanting sunlight? There was a subtle change in her air, her voice, her face—yes, even in her dress. That holland gown, he knew it well—he remembered when she had worn it first; but the bright blue ribbon round her throat and in her dark hair, the jaunty white feather in her black hat—these were something new to him; these told their own tale, and needed no interpreter.

Stephen spoke now with an easy equanimity that added fuel to the fire of Mark's wrath.

'Freda, you should introduce me to your old acquaintance.'

Acquaintance! how glad she was that he had chosen this word instead of friend!

But Mark did not seem to heed it. He answered for himself before she had time to speak—

‘I’m not much used to introductions. My name is Mark Cameron.’

Stephen had no need to be told that.

‘And mine is Redgrave,’ returned he, with the same quiet complacency. ‘I rather fancy you were good enough to hold a restive horse of mine a year or so ago, and that I have to thank you for saving my bones.’

Mark looked hard at him, and then broke into a short laugh.

‘It was you, was it? I remember now. You owe me no thanks though. A man can’t see a horse rear up on end under his very nose and keep his hands in his pockets. But I don’t suppose I thought much of your bones. Indeed, I’m sure I didn’t.’

‘Nevertheless the effect was the same, luckily for me,’ said Stephen good-humouredly; and then, after an instant’s pause, he added, ‘Perhaps you’ll let me show you some civility in return. It’s a hot afternoon, and we

haven't a bad tap of beer at the farm yonder; we are homeward bound now.'

He was a little curious to see what Freda would say to this. What she did say certainly surprised him considerably. She was not apt to be demonstrative towards him before observers; but now, slipping her arm caressingly through his, she said decidedly though very composedly—

'No, Steenie; I want you to come with me round by the old water-mill. If Mark Cameron wants any beer they will give it him at the house, I daresay.'

Mark smiled.

'Thank you; I don't happen to be thirsty,' he said, looking at her for one instant with a noticeable intentness; 'and if I were, I haven't yet learnt how to beg;' and then, with no word of farewell, he left them.

'Well, I can't say I think much of your old friend, Freda,' observed Stephen, looking after him. 'He's a very rough diamond indeed.'

'He isn't my friend,' she returned impetu-

ously ; ‘you mustn’t call me to account for his doings. But he is altogether altered ; he used not to behave like that.’

‘Lads often do alter a good deal between eighteen and twenty, for better or worse. With him it seems to have been for the worse. That speech of his about the hares was rather out of place, seeing that this was my uncle’s land before it was mine.’

‘Yes,’ said Freda. There was a faint flush in her cheeks, and she looked absently before her, as they again paced slowly along beneath the overarching trees.

‘I’m afraid he did not particularly admire your taste in husbands,’ proceeded Stephen gaily. ‘Judging by his manner, I should say that I did not impress him favourably.’

She roused herself to attend to what he was saying.

‘No ; I don’t think he ever did like strangers, especially if they were rich and——’

‘Fortunate’ suggested Stephen, as she hesitated for a word.

‘Yes, fortunate,’ she acquiesced, not compe-

hending his implied meaning. ‘Oh, Steenie, I am very tired. We won’t go round by the mill; we’ll go home, and I shall put myself into a comfortable chair, and make you read to me till tea-time.’

Stephen saw that she had no inkling of the idea that was working in his own mind. And he was content. Mark’s manner had not quite deceived him. He suspected that there was something in it beyond mere churlishness. No doubt, now that the fruit was plucked, the young fellow discovered that he wanted it. It was lucky that he had not found it out before. Freda, poor child! for all her present animosity, might have been beguiled into throwing herself away on him, if only to escape from her shrewish aunt. Now! this unmannishly sailor or anyone else was welcome to covet her, seeing that he himself held supreme rule over her heart.

‘So that is the man,’ muttered Mark grimly to himself as he walked rapidly towards Hamelford. ‘And I saved his bones, did I? or his life, perhaps? Well! I fancy if I

could have looked a few months ahead,
he wouldn't have had much to thank me
for! I didn't like the look of him then,
and I don't feel as if I liked him very much
better now.'





CHAPTER XIII.

'A chain of gold ye shall not lack,
Nor braid to bind your hair.'

'**A**ND the wedding garments are provided, are they?' asked Stephen, lazily surveying Freda as he lay at her feet, half buried in a fragrant bed of heather.

'Very nearly, thanks to your mother. There are two drawers in the big press upstairs full of pretty things, all of her giving. I should have been a sorry bride for you, Steenie, if it had depended on Aunt Becky to rig me out.'

'I don't know that; money won't buy all that dark hair, nor yet a certain pair of hazel eyes that I'm rather sweet upon. They are

worth a good deal more than silks and diamonds.'

'Are they?' said she, turning on him the eyes he had been lauding now bright with pleasure. 'I'm very glad of it.'

They were sitting together on the edge of the down above Hawkstone. A little to the right they could see the farm, and the broad acres that made up Stephen's inheritance; and to the north lay the silver sea and the long line of sandstone cliffs. It was an early season, and the corn-fields were ripening apace. Next week the harvest would be gathered in; and before the month was over, Stephen and Freda would be man and wife.

'So you care about your good looks, do you?' he asked, after contemplating her in contented silence for a minute or two.

'Of course I do,' she returned laconically.

'That's candid, at any rate,' laughed he.

'Don't all girls and women care about admiration and love; isn't it meat and drink to us? And don't I know that there is not

much in me to admire? I'm not half clever or accomplished enough to be a fit wife for you; and there is something else against me that troubles me sometimes. And so I'm all the more glad to know that my face at least satisfies you.'

'And, pray, what is the something else that troubles you, over and above the stupidity, which I totally deny?'

She shook her head.

'It's nothing you or I can change, Steenie, so it's no good telling you.'

'My curiosity is excited, and must be appeased. What is this skeleton in the cupboard?' insisted he.

'Well, if you must be told, it's neither more nor less than this,—I'm not your equal in birth, and of course I know that you might have married much better; and now and then I fancy that you may some day come to think so, and be ashamed, not exactly of me perhaps, but of the people belonging to me.'

'You don't belong to many people,' he

said playfully, not altogether sorry to evade the main point. ‘You are not burdened with relations.’

‘No ; there is only my aunt.’

‘And she is not likely to inflict herself much upon us. She is a tolerable fixture in Hamelford, and she isn’t altogether bound up in you, more shame for her.’

‘No ; but still she *is* my aunt. And then my father ; Stephen, you’ve never heard much about my father——’

‘Oh yes, I know that he was something of a black sheep.’

‘How did you know ?’ she asked, his off-hand tone jarring on her for an instant.

‘I forget who told me ; some of the people hereabouts, I suppose,’ he returned, vexed with himself for having been so outspoken.

She sat silent for awhile, wondering rather painfully whether he had purposely inquired ; wondering too what he might have heard.

‘I don’t know very much about him myself,’ she went on presently, in a grave subdued voice, ‘but I believe he led an odd roving

kind of life, and that he did not treat my mother very well. I should think he must have been a rough common sort of man,' she added, bravely resolved to be entirely honest, to conceal nothing that might perchance tend to throw discredit on herself.

'I daresay,' said Stephen carelessly, still uncomfortable, and anxious to quit the awkward subject. 'But he has been dead a good many years now, hasn't he?'

'Yes, he died abroad—in America, I think—when I was quite a tiny creature. I don't remember him. I'm not sure that he ever even saw me. What did you hear about him?' she asked, putting the question with something of an effort.

'Not much more than you've told me. He seems to have been rather too fond of cards and races to be a very domestic character; but I don't fancy he ever perpetrated any flagrant sins, beyond leaving your mother to take care of herself. By the bye, Freda, I never knew till the other

day that Cameron's father had a narrow escape of the gallows.'

' Didn't you?' she said rather curtly. ' I thought the whole country-side knew that.'

' I haven't been much in the way of Hamelford gossip. But it must be a galling thing for him.'

' Yes; he used not to like it. Perhaps he doesn't care now; or maybe he has learnt to be proud of it.'

' I should fancy,' Stephen went on, ' that a disgrace like that would be like a mill-stone round a man's neck, keeping him down in life. He could never hope to wear it out, so it would hardly be worth trying; and he would go to the dogs.'

' And there would be an end of him,' said Freda, coldly. Then changing her tone,—' I suppose, Steenie, you care a good deal for your respectability?'

He smiled. ' Well, yes. I care, in my way, for the good name the Redgraves have borne for generations back. On the whole I think that's more creditable than my

mother's gentility.' Then, seeing a wistful look on her face as she gazed out towards the sea, he added fondly, 'But, my darling, you aren't fretting your foolish little self about that, surely? My name will be yours, you know, in a fortnight's time.'

'Yes,' she said, in a low emphatic voice; 'and if I can help it you shall never repent that you chose me.'

'Not much fear of that,' he replied, holding out his hand to her caressingly. 'We shall be Darby and Joan down in the old house yonder for many a long year, I hope. I should not wonder if we even won the Dunmow Flitch. For I believe your quick temper to be a make-believe. I've seen nothing of it since you became my property. And as for me—to what heights of amiability may not a man aspire, when he has secured a wife who will let him smoke and hunt to his heart's content?'

She laughed. 'It would be too bad if all the benefits were to be on one side. I'm only afraid that your life is so smooth

already that it won't be easy for me to make it smoother.'

'The old complaint cropping up again in a fresh form—I'm too contented, too comfortable. What can I do? It really is perplexing. You ought to have refused me, Freda, and then—'

'Well! and then,' she repeated eagerly, as he left the sentence unfinished.

'I should not have been quite so comfortable,' he rejoined gravely; and then resuming his former tone—'I should have fallen into a rapid decline, and sent for you to nurse me in my last moments. I wonder whether you would have come?'

'How can I tell?' she said. 'You see, I did not refuse you; so now I must help you to endure your prosperity.'

'Yes! And as a preliminary, are you aware that we came out here to plan our wedding journey, and that we have not as yet said a single word about it? Which is it to be, Freda? Am I to show you how the Scotch hills take the shine out of our own moors,

or are we to do the sights of London? Or shall we take a bolder flight still, and improve our French accent in Paris?'

Freda looked up surprised.

'That last is quite a new notion, isn't it? And a very charming one too.'

'Why, yes! it came into my head just as I was falling asleep last night, and I rather take to it as a happy inspiration. You've seen nothing of the world, you little home-staying bird, and it would be a grand experience for you. How you would open your big eyes, and how you would enjoy it all! We might get a week in London at Christmas.'

'It seems to me that our life is to be one long holiday-time,' said Freda merrily. 'If I could only have foreseen all this in the days when I sighed over my stocking-darning, I should have been much consoled.'

'Oh, I shall find plenty of work for you, never fear. You're getting to be very experienced in farm produce already; and I shall make you keep all my accounts, and

write my letters; and then there is that cardinal wifely duty—sewing the buttons on my shirts. The mother undertakes that now.'

' Didn't I hear her saying something last night about carrying Lottie off to the north for a month or two ?'

' Yes ; she wants to leave us to ourselves at first. She offered to go back there altogether if we wished it ; but I told her neither you nor I did wish it, and that there was plenty of room for us all.'

' I should think so ; and besides, I look to her to teach me all manner of housekeeping secrets. Lottie too, I could not spare her.'

' I shall be jealous of Lottie if you don't take care,' Stephen observed, chiefly by way of drawing from her a deprecating protest. He was not yet by any means weary of hearing from her lips how much she loved him.

' Will you ?' she answered, smiling. ' No, I don't think jealousy is much in your line.' Then, growing suddenly earnest, she went on—' But even if it were,—wait and see,

Steenie. What is to-day,—the 3d of September, isn't it? Well, this day twelvemonth you shall tell me whether you are the least bit jealous of anybody, whether you are not quite certain that my whole heart belongs to you.'

'I think I might tell you as much as that now,' he answered gaily.

'No, don't!' she interposed; 'wait till you have proved it—till you know me better, and have learnt all my faults. How can you be sure? How can I be sure of myself even till I've been tried? There's only one thing of which I am quite sure.'

'What is that?' he asked, raising himself on his elbow and meeting her gaze.

'That if I didn't love you with my whole heart I should be utterly base and ungrateful.'

He smiled, as he often did, at her vehement language.

'I've earned your gratitude pretty easily, Freda, by pleasing myself. But I want you to tell me some of these terrible faults that I've yet to discover. Do you keep a

private brandy-bottle, or have you a fancy for purloining your neighbours' goods? or what other high crimes and misdemeanours do you specially affect?'

'You will find out soon enough,' she said gently and rather sadly. 'I know I'm not half as good as you think me, though I'm not given to any of your "high crimes." You think I am good-tempered now, because I have everything my own way, because you spend all your time in indulging me; but, Steenie, I *can* feel very bitter, very revengeful, very stubborn.'

'What a character!' he exclaimed. 'I suppose I ought to be aghast; but, Freda, you have not felt any of these fearful sentiments towards me at present?'

'No indeed,' she returned; 'how could I?'

'And you never will. I'm just what you see me now, as far as I know myself, and we shall always agree as well as we do now; or if we should chance to quarrel, we must kiss and make it up. I'm not afraid.'

'You've forgotten how disagreeable I was when you first knew me,' she said, smiling for the first time.

'Oh, that was all self-defence. You looked upon me as a wolf in sheep's clothing. But even then, you know, I saw glimpses enough of the real Freda to be lured to my destruction. You couldn't always keep on the mask.'

'Perhaps it wasn't a mask; perhaps it was the real Freda after all. I don't know, Steenie. I think I've two selves, a good one and a bad one; and the bad one often comes uppermost. I wonder if I should have been different if my mother had lived; if I had ever had any better training than Aunt Becky's when I was a little child.'

'I can't tell,' said he, taking her hand again and stroking it fondly; 'but I rather hope not. I am quite satisfied with you as you are.'

She made no further attempt to denounce herself, but sat silent till he exclaimed—

'There is Martin bringing round Brown

Peggy; we had nearly forgotten the riding-lesson.'

'So we had,' she responded, as if glad to dismiss her thoughts: then, as he helped her up from her heather seat, she added, 'I shall never be up to that chestnut mare of yours at this rate. Ah, here's Lottie coming to hunt us up; she has spied us from the garden.'

'Yes, she greatly enjoys patronising you, telling you how to hold the reins, and where your stirrup-foot ought to be. It will be quite a disappointment to her when you get beyond her instructions.'

Lottie met them before they reached the bottom of the hill; and Freda, donning her skirt, spent the next hour careering about the grass meadow, with Stephen now at her side, now watching her progress as she walked trotted and cantered round him on the ancient pony. She was quick and eager to learn, and already she could enjoy the exercise and excitement with keen zest.

'It does you all the good in the world,'

he said, as she drew up in front of him. ‘Do you know you have real roses in your cheeks for once in a way, and you are getting on capitally? I shall soon have you riding across country with me, and astonishing the Hunt. I wonder how many compliments I shall have about my pretty wife.’

‘Do you know that you are doing your best to turn my head?’ retorted she, laughing; ‘to say nothing of sacrificing yourself by mounting guard here, instead of being among the turnips. The partridges won’t know what to make of it.’

‘Never mind,’ said he; ‘I daresay they’ll excuse me. I did my duty by them on the first. Are you going to have another round, or is Lottie to get up now? She looks quite exhausted with racing about after you.’

‘Yes; I believe she thinks she ought to be close at hand to pick up the pieces. She shall have a turn now, and I must go home.’

‘Home? nonsense! Why, it is quite early still.’

‘Yes; but look there,’ pointing to a dark

bank of purple clouds coming up from the sea.
‘They will be upon us in an hour’s time, and I shall get a wetting if I don’t make haste.’

‘You had better stay here till the rain is over,’ Stephen suggested.

‘No indeed, I must not do that. There are all the school accounts to be made out before night, and I undertook to do them. I mustn’t fail Aunt Becky. I’m ashamed to think how little use I’ve been to her lately.’

‘Is it such a labour of love to help her?’
Stephen asked ironically.

‘You know it isn’t. But I do owe her something; and I must say for her she never complains now, let me be away as much as I may. Besides, I promised to do these accounts.’

‘Well! I suppose a wilful woman must have her way, and after the 20th you will be *my* bond-slave. So I’m ready, if go you must. Lottie child, Martin must look after you and the pony, for I’m going home with Freda.’

‘Perhaps you’d better not come?’ suggested Freda demurely. ‘I’m sure you

must have any number of things to do at home.'

'Have I? I'm not a responsible being just now, and can't manage my own affairs; and the men seem to think so, for they trouble me very little. We'll turn over a new leaf after we are married.'

As they passed the drawing-room window, Mrs. Redgrave leant out of it and called to them—

'Are you going back already? I wanted you to look at something in here.'

'I mustn't stay long,' protested Freda, as she turned towards the porch, 'or I shall certainly be caught in the rain.'

Spread out on the broad sofa was a glistening heap of white silk, and thrown over it a delicate lace veil crowned by a myrtle wreath.

'I have been amusing myself by fancying how you will look when you have it all on,' said Mrs. Redgrave, glancing complacently from the girl to her wedding attire.

'That's more than I can do,' answered Freda, laughing rather shyly. 'It's too great

a jump from my Sunday alpaca to all that finery ; and I once thought the Sunday alpaca almost unsuitably grand for me.'

'Wait a minute,' quoth Stephen, hastily departing. When he came back he had a set of gold ornaments in his hands, curiously wrought and set with opals. 'See,' he said, showing them to Freda. 'They were my mother's; they are to be yours. I mean to put them on myself, upon our wedding-day.'

She looked at them with eager undisguised pleasure.

'How beautiful! and they are all for me? I always liked opals. I used sometimes to stand and admire the opal ornaments in the jeweller's shop at Storleigh. And there is the necklace, and brooch, and earrings all complete. I must have holes made in my ears. Oh! thank you, Steenie!'

There was an almost childish simplicity in her enjoyment of the glittering trinkets, as she handled them and held them up to catch the light.

'Opals have an ill name, haven't they?'

observed Stephen, watching her. ‘They are said to bring ill fortune; but I think we can defy omens.’

She laid the jewels down reluctantly.

‘And now I must really be going. Don’t show me anything more, dear Mrs. Redgrave.’

‘But how about the muslin gowns?’ objected Mrs. Redgrave. ‘I wanted you to try them on. And then there are those collars!’

‘I’m afraid they must wait till to-morrow. Indeed, I must hurry back now.’

‘Millinery has at least one merit,’ said Stephen as they set forth; ‘it ensures your coming to-morrow.’

‘Yes; and of course nothing else would bring me; but don’t you think I ought really to stay away till the harvest is over? The corn is quite on my mind. I’m sure you can’t attend properly to it and to me too. I thought Martin looked at me quite reproachfully this afternoon when he unlatched the field-gate.’

‘And so you would prefer to go to the wall?’ he asked her.

'Well, no; I'm afraid I shouldn't,' she returned naively. 'I believe I was only following your bad example, and trying to decoy you into compliments and protestations. Oh, Steenie! I *do* like you to be fond of me. I like to know that you care about my comings and goings, and can't well get on without me.'

'I own to the weakness,' he said. 'Happily my sufferings in that way are drawing fast to a close. There's a field of barley for you, Freda. Isn't that a sight to gladden a farmer's eyes?'

She could do more than ignorantly admire, for he had taught her a great deal of his business in their almost daily wanderings about the farm.

There was something else that he had taught her half-unconsciously. In the last few weeks she had picked up with an astonishing quickness his modes of speech, his accent, his very turns of expression, so that sometimes he could hardly believe that her training until now had come solely from

Miss Morton and the Hamelford school-house. A little more—just the finishing-touches that he meant to put—and she would be fit company for any lady in the land.

'Aunt Becky will think me faithless after all,' observed Freda presently. 'You don't know what a pile of blue bills have to be made out this evening.'

'Was she very disconsolate over Lottie's departure?'

'No; she expected it, I suppose. At all events she knew she would lose her when we married.'

'Does she mean to go on school-keeping?'

'I can't tell; I don't believe she need, unless she pleases. I am almost sure she has money laid by, though she likes to call herself poor. She has always been careful, and we lived very cheaply.'

'It would be a frightfully dull life for her without her scholars and without you.'

'She will be rather glad than otherwise to be rid of me; I see that every day. And she won't find it a dull life. She will

have her old friends dropping in for a cup of tea, or she will put on her bonnet and take her work-basket over the way to Mrs. Selby, and gossip there by the hour together.'

'And who is Mrs. Selby?' asked Stephen.

'Don't you know? She is the widow of a Storleigh surgeon. She has no children, and nothing to do but watch her neighbours; and so she does that thoroughly.'

'You speak as if you had not any great liking for her.'

'And I have not,' said Freda with animation. 'Her tongue and Aunt Becky's wag too fast when they are together.'

'I suppose there are gossips and gossips. Now the mother dearly loves a chat about her neighbours and acquaintance, and yet it didn't seem to me that she and Miss Morton had much to say to one another the day they spent together at Hawkstone.'

'No, indeed! Mrs. Redgrave has always a good word for everyone, while Aunt Becky—but there; I don't want to pull *her* to pieces. See, Steenie, here we are at the milestone;

I'm not going to let you come a step further,
for I know you're wanted at the farm.'

'Very well, I submit,' he said, not very
well able to deny the imputation. 'To-
morrow then, my own! And now you had
better make haste, for the clouds are coming
up fast yonder, and the rain will be here
before long.'

He took her face between his two hands,
and kissed it very lovingly.

'Take care of your dear little self,' he said
softly. 'Remember you're very precious to
somebody.'

She lingered for a moment, as if loth after
all to leave him; then, turning suddenly, ran
lightly forward down the hill. Once she
stopped, and looking round saw him still
watching her; then she hurried on again,
quickenning her pace as she went. There
was something in rapid movement that seemed
to relieve that feverish excitement of spirits
which always took possession of her when
she was left alone. The day was drawing
so near now—the day that was to shut the

door on all past pain, and usher in the new bright life of love and hope and pleasure. Her thirsty lips panted for the full rich draughts that were to drown the dreary memories of her girlhood, and she yearned with a great longing to be once within the safe covert of Stephen's home.

'For he wants me; he is good to me: he wants my love!' she said to herself half aloud, repeating the words for the hundredth time, as though they were a spell to charm away all misgivings.

A carriage rolled by her, within it a county dame, daintily handling her silver-mounted whip; and the thought crossed Freda that soon she too might be driving her grey ponies into Hamelford, instead of racing on foot along the dusty road. Notwithstanding her speed the rain came too soon for her; big drops began to patter down upon her head as she neared the town. She wondered where Stephen might be. Well, he would not mind the rain, except for her. 'Take care of yourself.' How tenderly he had

said it! How thoughtful he was about her, always—always!

The drops fell faster, and the storm-clouds darkened the whole sky as she ran onward. But she did not heed them. She was in another world just then. Wet and breathless, she halted at last under the shadow of the schoolhouse porch. ‘Take care of yourself!’ This time the words came back to her with an almost mocking echo; but then followed quick the thought—‘Ah, very soon he will take care of me!—very—very soon!’





C H A P T E R X I V.

'We'll no more meet—no more see one another ;
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter.'

HE door yielded to Freda's hand when she pulled the latch, not being locked as Miss Morton mostly chose to have it after school hours.

She stepped within and was just going upstairs, when it struck her that she had better first dry her wet dress and jacket by the kitchen fire. A long white-washed passage led to the back regions ; and slipping off her boots that she might not soil the carefully-kept matting, she passed quickly and noiselessly along it, and opened the kitchen door. She had thought to find it empty, for she had espied Sally standing at the counter of the

little grocer's shop higher up the street; and her aunt was usually, at that hour, established in the parlour with her work-basket. It rather surprised her, therefore, to see the well-known figure in the dark stuff gown and net cap standing still and silent beside the window, and facing towards the fireplace. But she was more than surprised—she was startled—at the sight of another person, an elderly man, who sat in the big wooden chair drawn close up to the hearth, with his feet on the fender and his back towards her.

He had been speaking, when she entered, in a low harsh voice; but he had stopped short at the sound of the opening door, and turned half round to look at her. He seemed to be roughly and commonly clad in some sort of coarse pilot-coat, and his hat and stick and a stained canvas bag lay on the table just behind him.

So much Freda took in at the first hurried survey; and then from him she glanced back again at her aunt, as if mutely demand-

ing some explanation of this unlooked-for presence.

There was never too much light let into the low room from its single casement window, but there was enough, even on this gloomy afternoon, to show Freda that her aunt's face was pale and strangely disturbed. The girl hesitated for a moment, uncertain whether she had best advance or retreat. The visitor was altogether unknown to her; and it was so very rare a thing for any man except Stephen to cross their threshold nowadays, that she never doubted he had come on some special errand. Something too in his attitude seemed to say that he had good right to be there, welcome or unwelcome. He himself cut short her doubts; for, before her aunt had moved or spoken, he had pushed back his chair and risen, hastily exclaiming—

‘ Little Milly! ’

Freda stood regarding him now in speechless astonishment, while he stared back at her, repeating again under his breath,

‘ Sure it *must* be little Milly.’

The idea that he was mad darted into the girl's mind, and her eyes turned once more in sudden alarm towards her aunt. Miss Morton met the terrified look, but there was no encouragement in her cold rigid face. Without moving she spoke in answer, not to Freda but to the stranger.

'It is Freda herself. The mischief is done, as I knew it would be. She thinks you crazy. You may tell her; not I.'

He hesitated for a moment, and then advanced until he was within arm's length of Freda, still observing her intently. Her first frightened instinct had been flight; but she had conquered it, and now stood her ground, quietly waiting for what might next befall. After all, there was nothing either wild or menacing in the grey eyes that were so closely scanning her from under those shaggy brows. Nay, she could almost have fancied that there was a certain softness in their fixed gaze; and though age, and it might be hard living and exposure, had drawn many wrinkles and furrows about the

cheeks and brow, and grizzled the thick curly hair, yet there were still the traces of past comeliness in the weather-beaten face. But there was a hard ring in his voice, as he asked abruptly—

‘Haven’t you so much as a word to cast at your father?’

‘My father!’ she breathed, almost wondering now whether it could be she who was going mad.

‘Ay! your father. Ask your good aunt there if you can’t take my word for it, whether my name is not Paul Chace.’

‘Aunt Becky?’

She could not just then frame any further question.

‘It is true enough,’ Miss Morton answered, in a sharp high key; ‘and worse luck for you that it is true.’

‘That’s nice teaching for my daughter,’ Paul Chace broke in, with a short bitter laugh. ‘It’s quite pleasant to get such a welcome home when one has been knocking about the world for eighteen years.’

'But he is dead, my father,' Freda faltered, gazing in bewilderment at the face confronting hers.

'He is *not* dead,' he returned roughly; 'and whoever told you so lied through his teeth. I say that I, standing here now, am your father: deny it who can!'

A kind of giddiness came over her, and she caught blindly at a table near for support.

'It seems to have taken you aback,' he said, laying hold of her arm not ungently. 'It's fallen on you a bit sudden, I daresay. Come and sit down here by the fire, and listen to what I've got to say.'

She let him lead her to the chair which he had but lately occupied, and place her in it. She had no power just then to object, even if she had desired it. Then he drew another chair opposite to her, and seating himself astride it he began speaking again in short abrupt sentences.

'I've been felling timber in the backwoods, and digging for gold in Australia,

all these years, while you've thought me under the sod; that is, if you've ever troubled your head to think about me, which most like you haven't. As for me, I never so much as knew I had a child till a few months back, or maybe you'd ha' seen me here before. Do you heed what I'm saying?' he asked, breaking off, seeing that she still looked at him as if stupefied.

'I am trying; but it's so strange, I don't know how to believe it true;' and she spoke almost as though she were thinking aloud.

'It may be strange, but it's the truth for all that. I only had one letter from England after I left, and that was from a chum of mine at Althorpe. I'd written to your mother and sent her some money, which I'd had hard work to scrape together, but I never heard whether she got it. I wrote again before I sailed for Australia, but hadn't so much as a word in answer. That raised my dander, and I gave it up as a bad job.'

'It was likely that she would answer your letters,' put in Miss Morton sneeringly. 'You had treated her so well! you'd been such a good husband to her!'

He looked up fiercely, as if to retort; then changed his mind, and went on speaking to Freda.

'I never heard a word, I say, until I stumbled on a west-country man, an old acquaintance of mine, last spring in Melbourne. He had been in Hamelford, and he told me that my wife was dead, and that she had left a daughter. You might have knocked me down with a crow-quill! I'd been living from hand to mouth for a good many years, and had had a tough tussle with fortune; but I'd worsted her at last, and my pockets were pretty well lined, so I thought I'd just take ship at once, and make my way home to England to see my daughter. More fool I, you're thinking! And so I was; but folks do get foolish in their old age, and I suppose my time's come, for I'm getting an old man now—nigh upon sixty.'

There was a melancholy cadence in his voice as he spoke those last words, which, in spite of all the assumed bravado, touched Freda's heart. She had taken it in now, this strange undreamt-of truth; and though she could not all at once feel drawn to the father who had come to life with such startling suddenness, his disappointment smote her almost with a sense of guilt for her own ignorance and indifference about him. In the impulse to do or say something which might be a sign of sympathy and welcome, she bent forward and silently touched his hand as it rested on his knee. A gleam, like a ray of sunlight, crossed his rugged features, and he took the offered hand in his own, holding it in a firm grasp.

'So you won't turn your back on the wanderer after all, my girl,—you won't believe all the fine tales that good lady' (nodding towards Miss Morton) 'may choose to have told you ?'

'She has told me hardly anything,' said Freda tremulously. 'She believed—everyone believed that you were dead.'

He laughed contemptuously.

‘Ay; just because a chattering sailor chap gets wind that I’m down with yellow jack, and takes it into his head to kill me outright! She was ready enough to swallow his news, I’ll warrant; for there was never any love lost between your Aunt Rebecca and me.’

‘And there wasn’t likely to be,’ said Miss Morton, again breaking the silence that she seemed to have been trying hard to maintain. ‘You’ve been a curse to our family ever since we first set eyes on you, and I’m thinking that we have not yet seen the last of the harm you can do. Freda will decide as she pleases, I suppose; but if she takes my advice, she will turn her back on you this very day—she will have nothing to say to you, one way or the other, from this time forth.’

She laid a marked emphasis on her words, and looked at Freda with a most significant anxiety. Her father, too, eyed her attentively. She had withdrawn her hand from his, and

did not reply at once ; but when she did, her answer was distinct and steady.

‘No ! I can’t decide as I please—I can’t turn my back on my own father, and have nothing to say to him, even if I wished to do it. And I do not wish to do it.’

‘Right !’ said Paul, striking his broad hand on the arm of his chair, keen satisfaction again illuminating his face. ‘That’s my brave girl ! I thought Milly’s face would not play me false.’

‘I’ve no power over you,’ said Miss Morton, addressing Freda, this time with angry sharpness. ‘You can put my wishes and opinion on one side if you choose, though the cost and trouble of keeping you have been thrown on my shoulders all these years. But this I tell you, that if you settle now to have anything to do with that father of yours yonder, it will be the worst day’s work you have ever done in your life. Mark my words if it isn’t !’

‘I can’t tell how that may be, Aunt Becky,’ said Freda quietly ; ‘and I haven’t had much

time yet to consider; but of this I'm quite sure, that since my father is alive and is here, he has something to do with me, and I must have something to do with him.'

'Good, again!' exclaimed Paul triumphantly; 'and as for the paltry sum spent on you,' he added, glancing defiantly across at Rebecca, 'I'm ready and able to pay it back twice over.'

At any other time such an announcement would have been hailed by Miss Morton with no small gratification; but her enmity towards Paul Chace was too profound to be even thus appeased, and she only rejoined with increased acrimony, speaking to him, but looking at Freda,

'I have said my say, and I have done for the present. Perhaps, when Freda has heard a little more about you, and has considered a bit, she may think fit to change her mind. Perhaps she may turn a deaf ear to me, as her mother did; but her mother lived to repent her obstinacy; and so will she, as sure as my name is Rebecca Morton. I won't be in your way any longer now. I'll leave you

to enjoy each other's company, since you seem to find it so agreeable.'

And with this final taunt she stalked out of the kitchen, leaving the father and daughter alone together.

'A good riddance!' exclaimed Paul, as the door closed behind her. 'I certainly should not have taken the trouble to come across the seas to meet Rebecca Morton again; but I'd have done it a dozen times over if I'd known that I could ever again see anything so like my little Milly's eyes in this world;' and his own softened once more as he looked in his daughter's face.

'Who was she?' asked Freda; 'this little Milly that you say I am so like.'

'She was my sister—my only one; the best sister ever a man had. If she had lived, I should have been a different sort of man perhaps; but she died when she was a slip of a girl like you, just when I wanted her most to keep me straight. No one took that trouble after she went. No one cared a fig what became of me.'

It was a plaint that came straight home to his listener; for had she not silently felt the like many and many a time?

'My mother?' she asked timidly; 'she must have cared once.'

'Not she; she was taken with my looks, I suppose. I was a fine fellow twenty years ago, though you would not guess it now. But she turned against me before the honeymoon was out. Well, I don't want to blame her; we were an ill-matched pair from the first, and I had not married her altogether for love. It was cutting off my nose to spite my face. She had more against me than I had against her; but if you had happened to take after her, I should not have felt as I did just now, when I saw my Milly's brown eyes looking at me from the doorway yonder: it seemed to bring back the days when I was a light-hearted lad, with all my life before me,'—and he sighed.

The tone, the sigh roused within Freda an emotion more soft and pitiful than any that her father had yet called forth. Rough

as he was, blunt and outspoken even to coarseness, she yet divined that there were some gentle feelings hidden in his breast. Heartless and selfish as his past conduct seemed to show him, she could already believe that there might be some unknown excuse for his long neglect of his dead wife. He had taken the chief blame on himself, but there might have been something of it lying at her mother's door as well; and if it were so, would she not have wished so much the more, could she have seen him now, that their child should make him some amends, should try to like him, to love him as she herself must surely have loved him when she left her home, and married him against her sister's will? Those were the thoughts rising within Freda as she sat, and they were struggling with the vague shrinking and dismay that had been created by his loud blustering manner, and by that fatherly familiarity which he had assumed so readily. But now another image, thrust aside hitherto by the astounding disclosures of the

last half-hour, entered her brain. Stephen ! What would he say to this man, with his off - hand uncivilised ways, his vagrant habits, his more than dubious character ? Their talk only that very afternoon came back to her with a new and deeper bearing in it. But could it have been that afternoon ? Could it really be little over an hour since she and Stephen had been walking together over the moor ? Was it all real that had happened to her since ? Was this man at her side, looking silently into the fire, indeed her father ? Instinctively she put her hand before her eyes, and something of the first shock of bewildered disbelief swept over her once more. Her father's voice dispersed it.

' I'm afraid I gave you a fright at first, my dear ; and no wonder, when you thought I'd been dead and buried years ago. I hadn't remembered that properly beforehand, but I would have tried to break it to you more softly like, if it hadn't been for your aunt. She always knew how to rub me

up the wrong way, and she had managed to do it then.'

'What had she been saying?' Freda asked him.

'Saying! what hadn't she been saying! I thought she would have dropped when she first caught sight of me. And then, when she was quite sure who it was, she gave it me pretty hot. She wanted to get me out of the way before you came back, and she left no stone unturned to do it. But I wasn't going to come half over the world for nothing, and so I told her. "I mean to stay here," I said, "till I've seen my girl with my own eyes—ay, and spoken to her too." "She'll have nothing to say to you," says she; "you may be sure of that." "I'm not going to take your word for it," says I. "I'll have speech of her myself; and if you don't choose to let me stay inside your house, why I'll wait outside, that's all; but see her I will! If she doesn't care to own me, why then I'll take myself off and make the best of it.

But if she's ready to hold to me, I'll hold to her and do what I can for her, in spite of you and your ill-will."

The thought of Stephen was still pressing hard on Freda, and she could find no words to utter just then; but her father spoke again, almost as though he had read her mind.

'I'd been planning all the voyage home, how, if we two could contrive to hit it off, we might perhaps set up house together somewhere in Old England. But that cat won't jump, I find; at least, if your aunt speaks truth, which perhaps she doesn't. She says there's a smart young fellow courting you, who would turn up his nose at me.'

'He is not—he would not!' but here Freda stopped.

Whatever Stephen might be ready to do and bear for her sake, there was no question that her father, such as he was, would not be a man after her intended husband's heart.

Paul was quick to see her embarrassment, and to comprehend it.

'Not much blame to him if he did,' he went on carelessly. 'I never was anything to brag of, and a bush life hasn't improved me.' Then, his tone changing utterly, he leant forward and laid his heavy hand on her shining hair. 'Child! child! I'm but a poor sort of father for you to have found, and there's reason enough why you should not care two straws about me, now I have turned up. If you say the word, I'll go back to my old life alone, and not trouble you any more; but if you'll give me a chance, I'll try whether I can't make you care for me; and if you once did, I could snap my fingers at all the world beside.'

There was something in Freda which met that appeal with an intense instant response. She had a strong, unreasoning, fellow-feeling for the proscribed and lonely of the earth; and here, beseeching her affection, was one for whom in her orphaned childhood she had often pined in vain. Forgetting all that had been jarring on her in his demeanour but just before, regardless of her aunt's

warnings, regardless for the moment even of Stephen and the new ties which might fetter her free action, remembering only that he was her father, and that he was lonely as she had often been lonely, she exclaimed fervently,

‘No, do not go away! I will care for you; I will be a good and dutiful daughter to you always. If we cannot live together, as you meant we should, at least I will see you often—very often.’

His face broke into a smile almost for the first time.

‘I never thought to be so glad, to hear kind words from any woman’s lips, let alone my own daughter’s! I couldn’t have grumbled much if you had chosen to give me the cold shoulder. It would have been natural enough, I suppose; but it would have been a heavy blow to me all the same. I’ll tell you what! when I first heard I had a daughter here in the old country, I almost jumped out of my skin, I was so pleased. I’d hard work to keep from telling

every soul I met, and getting laughed at for my pains.'

'And yet,' said Freda, gently almost timidly, 'you had not been happy with my mother,—you left her.'

'That's true enough; but I'd more cause than you guess, and it was many a long year ago. It's been a drear thought to me of late that I hadn't kith nor kin left in the wide world, and that I might drop into my grave without a living soul caring two straws whether I was above ground or under it. I don't complain. I've helped to make my own bed; but that doesn't make it any easier to lie on it—rather the other way. Well! after I had taken ship and was on my way home, I began to think that maybe it was a wild-goose chase after all, and that as Rebecca Morton had the rearing of you, she'd most like have made you just such another as herself.'

Freda smiled. She could thoroughly sympathise with her father's alarm at the notion of finding her like Aunt Becky.



C H A P T E R X V.

'It is said of old, "Soon hot, soon cold;
And so is a woman."

 Of course you know what will come
of all this,—how it will end?'
Miss Morton propounded the
question with biting sarcasm, when she and
Freda were talking together that same night.

'I think I do,' Freda answered calmly.

'He'll just drop you like a hot cinder when
he hears what you mean to tell him. He
isn't the man to play tricks with. I've seen
enough of him to know that.'

'And you call it playing tricks with him
to tell him the plain truth, that my father,
whom we thought dead, is alive here in
Hamelford?'

Freda spoke with a quiet scorn, and, leaving her chair, went to the window, pushed it wider open, and leant out to get a whiff of the damp sweet-scented night air.

The tallow candles on the table flared in the draught, and guttered away before Miss Morton's thrifty eyes without attracting her notice. She did not even feel the sudden puff of wind, her thoughts were so busily engaged.

'Why *should* you tell him? that's what I want to know,' she asked irritably. 'If it hadn't been for your own folly, you might have shaken your father off to-day. He said himself he had no mind to stay where he wasn't wanted. Even now, if you told him outright that he would hinder your marriage, I'm pretty sure you might get rid of him. I suppose he'd wish you to be well settled, since he's so mighty fond of you; and he might slip away easily enough, for no one knows him in these parts.'

'But he will not hinder my marriage in the very least; and if he did,—if he did,' Freda

repeated, turning round to face her aunt with sparkling eyes, and crimson spot burning on either cheek, ‘it would be better that I should live and die unmarried, than that I should act basely by Stephen, by my father. You judge Stephen by yourself, Aunt Becky, but I *know* him.’

‘And I might have known that I was wasting words on you,’ returned Miss Morton passionately. ‘I might talk till I was black in the face without moving you. Go your own way then. Tell Mr. Redgrave what you like; only mark this, if *he* throws you over, don’t look to *me* to keep you, for you don’t spend another day under my roof. You and your father may just shift for yourselves; I’ve had more than enough of you already.’

‘We will,’ said Freda proudly. ‘Be sure we won’t come on you.’ Then, more gently, she added—‘You have taken care of me a long while. I don’t forget that’

‘Pooh !’ retorted Miss Morton ; ‘deeds, not words, for me. If you had any common sense

—much more, common gratitude—but there! it's nothing to me what you do.'

She was departing candle in hand to bed, when Freda spoke to her again.

'Did you know—did you guess,' she asked with some constraint, 'that my father was alive all this while?'

'Guess it?' echoed Miss Morton, as she looked back and saw the dark eyes regarding her fixedly. 'Not exactly! You may be sure, if I had guessed it, I should have let him know that it was his business to bring up his own child. I thought it was his ghost when he walked into the kitchen this afternoon. I wish it had been. No ghost that ever walked could be the plague to me Paul Chace has been!'

'No! you could not have guessed it,' said Freda meditatively. 'Good-night, Aunt Becky.'

Long after she was left alone she sat on by the open window, her arms folded on the broad sill, gazing up into the starlit sky, and thinking, thinking of many things.

She had told Stephen to expect her at Hawkstone by three o'clock the next day, and she knew that if she were later he would come and meet her. She wanted him to do so; she could not talk to him lightly of all their pleasant plans until she had told him what had befallen since they parted; and she had a fancy for telling him on the self-same spot where they had sat and spoken about her father not eight hours ago.

So it was close on the appointed time when she left the last house in Hamelford behind her, and found herself out in the open moorland country. Her father knew nothing of her purpose. He had slept the night before at an inn hard by, and had started at daybreak for the inland town where he had left his baggage. He looked to be back the next day, and then he meant to stay in Hamelford till, as he himself phrased it, 'he should have had time to turn round.'

It was a fresh bright afternoon. The rain had cooled the air and revived the

leaves and grass, the birds were carolling gaily in the hedgerows, and the reapers were already busy in the fields near the town. It fell out as Freda had intended ; before she had crossed the moor Stephen met her. He rallied her pleasantly on her tardiness, and was half disposed to protest against their lingering on the hill-side when there was so much to be settled at home ; but he yielded readily to her wish, and let her lead the way to their heather bank. His head was full of many projects, and he talked on eagerly, scarcely noticing her scant replies for some time ; till presently breaking off and looking up at her as she sat just above him, he said laughingly—

‘ Furniture and farming are fertile topics for a householder, but it strikes me that I’m doing all the talking. I have not heard your voice for the last five minutes. Come, dear, let me have your views now on things in general.’

Freda felt her breath beginning to go. She had tried as she came along to consider

the best way of telling him, and she had believed that it would not be hard to do. But now, in the face of his utter unconsciousness, she did not well know how to begin. She wanted to prepare him somewhat, but her thoughts were getting hurried and confused.

'I don't think I have any views; at least if I have, I can't remember them now,' she said quickly; 'but, Steenie, I have a great deal to say—a great deal to tell you.'

'And you are oppressed with your own weighty communications, I see. Have any great events come about since yesterday evening?'

It was no use attempting to pave the way; the truth must come.

'Steenie, when I got home last evening, I found, in the kitchen with Aunt Becky, my father, whom we thought dead!'

Her words sounded abrupt and startling even to herself; but Stephen's face, as she looked into it, expressed something very like amusement.

'Your father, indeed! My dear Freda, for what end are you trying to test the extent of my credulity?'

His unconcern almost made her shiver, and she spoke again with impetuous earnestness.

'Won't you understand that I'm not in fun,—that I'm telling you truth?'

He laid his hand on her knee, and answered more gravely and, for him, just a little impatiently—

'My dear child, I'll understand anything you please when you talk sense; but when you talk nonsense, I can only suppose there is a joke somewhere, though I confess I don't see it. Your father, as we both know, died some eighteen years ago; therefore I can't well pretend to believe that you found him in your aunt's kitchen yesterday.'

'But he did not *die*; it was a false report. He has been living in America and Australia all these years. He has had a hard life, but he has made some money at last. He landed a few days ago. He did not know anything about me till lately.'

She said all this rapidly and very earnestly, Stephen looking at her the while. When she had ended he uttered a sound of consternation, and his face clouded.

'That's past a joke, indeed!' he said, as if involuntarily. Then, rallying his ideas, he added eagerly as if clinging to a hope—

'But are you sure you are not deceived? Such things happen sometimes, and you know it is impossible for you to recognise him.'

'For me, yes; but not for Aunt Becky. No one would be so ready as she to say that he was not my father if she could, for she has an old grudge against him, and is very bitter about his coming back. She wanted me to hide it from you, and to get him, if I could, to go away again at once.'

Stephen stroked her hand.

'It would not have been very like you,' he said fondly, 'to have kept me in the dark. You are too honest for that.'

'I should never have been able to look you in the face again,' she answered simply,

'if I had been tempted to do it ; but, indeed, I was not tempted for one minute.'

'I think though,' continued Stephen slowly, 'that the latter part of her advice was excellent.'

'I am sorry,' said Freda a little tremulously, and not replying directly to his last remark—'I am sorry for *your* sake, Steenie, that this has happened. I have not forgotten what we were talking about only yesterday, when we never dreamt of my father's being alive, and I know it will be trying for you. He is kind to me—very ; but he is more noisy and downright than I pictured him, and he has led a strange rough life. He is not the sort of man you would be able to like.'

Stephen did not immediately answer. Presently he said, rather shortly—

'And what does he mean to do with himself ?'

'He has not settled anything yet, but he will stay about here at least for sometime.'

Another pause. Stephen plucked a bit of heather and began biting it abstractedly. Freda

sat, her hands clasped round her knees, her eyes taking in the woods and fields, the long stretches of moorland, the blue-green sea specked with white sails, and the dim distant line of the Welsh hills, her mind leaping rapidly onwards to the perplexities and pains that her father's presence might entail on Stephen. She was hardly conscious of his silence till he broke it by saying in a decided tone, as though his mind were made up—

'Well, there's no good crying over spilt milk. It's a nuisance, a horrible nuisance, of course ; but that's neither here nor there. You and I didn't make it, and we can't do much, as far as I see, to mend it. I think we had better hasten on the wedding-day. Have it as early as we can in next week, and then go away for a good time longer than we intended. Perhaps he will have taken wing again before we get back. If not, I must manage to make him understand that he won't be welcome at Hawkstone. You see we can't flit for good and all ; we

must be fixtures here, whether he chooses to go or stay.'

He waited for a response, looking not at Freda, but at the stone gables of Hawkstone. This time, however, it was she who was mute. Her silence lasted so long that he shifted his position to get a better view of her face, and this movement roused her to speak.

' Does that mean that I must have nothing to say to him—that you want to keep us altogether apart? Or does it only mean that you would not like him to come to *your* house, or to have anything to do with *you*?"

She spoke very quietly, but there was something in the way she worded the question which took him by surprise. It had never occurred to him that they might think differently about it, and the distinction she drew between them grated on him. Still he saw that he had hurt her, and he was sorry. Putting his arm round her, he said kindly—

' You cannot have much to say to him if he does not come to our house, you know; and, of course, what holds good for me must

hold good for my little wife too. After all, Freda, you don't and can't care about him, and he does not deserve that you should. He is your father only in name. He has no right to thrust himself upon you. You belong to me !'

She did not resist the pressure of the encircling arm, but her eyes were still fixed on the far distance.

'When I told you just now,' she said, speaking very steadily and calmly, 'that I was sorry for your sake that he had come back, I ought to have said that I was not sorry for my own. I don't know whether I ought to care about him, but I know that I do, though I never saw him till last night. It would seem to me a shocking thing to treat him as you say.'

'That's mere folly, Freda,' said Stephen impatiently, and letting his clasping arm fall again; 'I'm not the man to think lightly of kith and kin, or to wish you to do anything "shocking," as you call it. But this is a case by itself. Ask anyone you please whether

a father who has acted as yours has done has any claim on you, and see what answer you'll get.'

'I daresay anyone I might ask would say what you do,' she returned wearily; 'but it could make no difference. Of course, I should be more swayed by your opinion than by any other. And perhaps you may be right; perhaps he has not any claim upon me,' and she paused, as though considering.

'Of course I am right,' said Stephen, keen to carry his point without delay. 'I knew you must see it when you began to reflect.'

'Ah, but I don't see it! It seems to me that if he has failed in his duty to me, it is no reason why I should be heartless and undutiful to him. And then, remember that he did not know. It was my mother he wronged, not me; for he had never even heard that I was alive.'

'Pshaw! So he says; but I don't know why we are to take his word for it.' Then, as the colour rose to her cheek, he added, relenting—

'I hate giving you pain, Freda, but I can't

help it. There's nothing for it but plain speaking just now.'

'Never mind! But, Steenie, I want to say this,—even if I were sure that you were right, and I was wrong; even if it were clear to me that I ought to follow your wishes, as I must have done if we had been married——'

'I wish to Heaven we were!' he broke in vehemently.

'No; don't wish it till you've heard me out. Even then I could not be happy or content. I should have for ever ringing in my ears his voice, when he said last night that he was getting an old man, and was a fool for coming home.'

'He must be a clever fellow after his kind,' said Stephen ironically. 'He has known how to come round you, at any rate. It took me three months to make the way with you he has made in three hours.'

'When I was a little child,' she went on, as though following out her own thought, 'I used to try and fancy what it would be like

to have a father. I used to long to be able to remember him, even in the dim way I remembered my mother. And now he has come, he has been given back to me; and you want me to keep him at arm's length, and cut him to the heart.'

'If he is the kind of man that I take him for, that you yourself admit him to be, he is not thin-skinned enough to be so very sensitive as you seem to fancy him, Freda. If he were in distress or want, I would have you help him, by all means; but you say he has money. Take my word for it, he would soon find his way back to his old comrades, and lead as jolly a life among them as he has probably done through all these years.'

He waited a minute, and then again drawing her towards him, he added with eager persuasiveness—

'Come, Freda mine; I don't think I've been a very exacting lover hitherto. I'm so fond of you, that I've liked to please you as far as I could. But now I want you to please me about this one thing. Give me your promise

that it shall be as I wish. If you pass your word, I shall be quite satisfied. I know I may trust you to keep it.'

'Yes, if I gave my word you might trust me,' she said in a low voice; 'but I can't do it—indeed I can't. I should be wretched; I should make you wretched.'

'And what are you doing now?' he demanded impetuously. 'Do you think it is very pleasant to me to have this contention? Do you think it would be a very agreeable prospect for me to have to blush for my wife's father every time he opened his mouth, to live in fear that he would be doing something discreditable; and yet to be hail-fellow-well-met with him, as though he were my dearest friend? Freda, you talk of claims! It seems to me I have some little claim to your consideration too. At least you thought so yesterday.'

'You have, I know you have,' she rejoined in an agitated voice. 'Indeed, I don't need to be put in mind of it; but the path is very dark, and I can't well see my way.'

I wonder,' lifting up her bent head, and regarding him with great wistful eyes, 'whether some day they will all be made clear,—the strange things that happen to us here.'

'It is all clear enough now,' Stephen answered gloomily, 'if you would only see it. You force me to put it harshly. When you marry me, you must make up your mind to give up your father. There is no choice about it.'

She still looked at him intently.

'Yes,' she said, almost under her breath, 'there is still a choice. You may give me up; I shall not blame you.'

'What does that mean?' he asked, startled.

'It means,' she said gravely and almost solemnly, 'that I must hold to my father. I promised him last night that I would be a good and dutiful daughter to him—that I would try to see him often. I think I was right to make that promise. I am sure I am right to keep it, and I will keep it.'

'You have quite decided?'

'Quite!' she said, keenly alive to his altered tone.

Stephen had spoken truth in declaring that he was not an exacting or arbitrary lover. He was neither given to jealousy nor readily roused to wrath; and his easy good-humour made him more prone to yield than to do battle about trifling matters. But to-day his temper had been put to a hard test. It was sufficiently embarrassing to have this vulgar vagabond father-in-law appearing in the flesh just at the most inconvenient of times. It was irritating to find Freda turning restive, when it was so very necessary she should prove compliant. But it was something more than embarrassing or irritating to hear her deliberately proposing to break the bond between them, rather than accept the conditions he proposed.

Deep down in Stephen's heart, even when his love burned most strongly, there had always lurked a sense that he gave more than he got; that he was paying a price for his happiness, and that his wife's humble origin

might bring with it some penalties and mortifications. Still he had, as he believed, counted the cost, and he was very sure that he did not repent his bargain. He did not repent it now; but he was stung to the quick to find the treasures he rated so highly held so cheap, to find his love, his wealth, all the good gifts he had bestowed, tossed back into his hands as of no worth.

When she uttered that distinct unfaltering 'Quite,' he started up in uncontrolled anger. She could not mean it, that was impossible; but it was bad enough—too bad—that she should have said it.

'Very well! I can only take you at your word. You elect to throw in your lot with him rather than me. It is flattering, certainly!'

'I elect,' she returned in a low voice, and bringing out the words with difficulty, 'to follow my duty as far as I see it. It is you, not I, who say that it must separate us.'

'I say, certainly, that Mr. Paul Chace and I are not likely to be kindred spirits; that we three can't sail together in the same

boat. No doubt he may be a most estimable man ; but you see I am, unfortunately, blind to his merits.'

It was strange that she too did not get angry. He thought so even then, in the midst of his own exasperation. He almost wished that she would pay back his cutting words in kind, and that so they might have their quarrel out, and kiss and make it up, as he had suggested yesterday.

But she controlled herself marvellously.

'Steenie, what is the use of saying these cruel things ? You are very angry with me, and perhaps it is natural that you should be ; but, indeed, I cannot help it. Try to put yourself in my place ; try to see things with my eyes for a little while.'

She spoke so gently, so pleadingly, that once again he believed that she was yielding ; but he was too angry to be at once appeased.

'That is rather too much to expect,' he returned coldly ; 'but I am ready to listen to anything you have to say.'

She sat for a while silent, as though

collecting her thoughts, nerving herself for an effort ; and then she said in a changed tone—

‘I think you are right, and that it *is* too much to expect. I don’t believe you *can* see things as I do. Everything about you has been so different. You reminded me just now of our talk yesterday. I have not forgotten what you said then about the Redgraves and your good name ; though, perhaps, I had not thought enough about it before I came here to-day.’

She stopped again, as if expecting some answer ; but he held his peace, waiting for what should come next.

‘I am his daughter, his own flesh and blood,’ she continued, in the same constrained tone. ‘Nothing can alter that. If you married me, there would be always *that* to vex you, even if you never saw him or heard his name.’

‘I don’t know what you are driving at,’ he interposed impatiently. ‘I have told you already that he need not come between us unless you choose to let him.’

‘If you married me,’ she repeated, ‘you

might sometimes be ashamed, not only of him, but of me. I think you would be; but if I had broken my solemn word, if I had turned my back on my own father, who has come across the world to find me, who has no other child, then, oh! Stephen, *how* you would despise me!"

"I should not," he asseverated. "I should say and think then as I say and think now—that you would be perfectly right."

"I shall not put you to the proof," she said with a strange smile.

"And so," he broke out, looking down at her with kindling eyes as he stood before her, "after 'befooling me for the last three months, is this to be the end?"

"Steenie! don't let the last words between us be bitter ones, that we shall not be able to forget. You had best go away now; but, before you go, I want you to say that you will forgive me for any pain I have caused you. Can't you say it?"

She held out her trembling hand, but he would not see it.

'I will relieve you of my presence, if you wish it,' he said, hardly able to control his anger; 'but I'm not quite in the mood for civil forgiving speeches.'

'Then go!' she entreated. 'Go at once! No good can come of our talking more now; but, oh! if I could make you understand——'

'I'll tell you what I understand,' he interrupted, 'and it's just this,—that you seem to think you made a mistake in accepting me, and that you have succeeded in finding an easy way out of the dilemma. I congratulate you on your ingenuity.'

He had turned abruptly away and was already mounting the hill, when he heard her voice calling to him. Looking round he saw that she was following. She came up almost breathless with the haste she had made.

'Steenie!' she panted, 'stay one moment—only one! Say that you didn't mean those last words! That you don't really believe I have tried—I have intended——'

She stopped, and looked at him earnestly, imploringly.

'You know,' she resumed with increasing energy, 'that I would marry you if I could!'

'How can I tell?' he retorted. 'It is all a mystery to me.'

She gazed at him still for a moment, with a strange troubled yearning and anxiety in her eyes; then slowly turned back to her seat amid the heather, and left him to go his way unhindered. But he had seen her agitation, and his heart was many degrees lighter already.

'She will come round,' he said to himself as he strode homeward, his ire evaporating with every step he took. 'She is almost ready to give in now, and it is only her pride holds her back. Womanlike, she has been trying to get the upper hand, and she doesn't choose to own that she has been beaten. She wants to persuade me into meeting her half way--making some concession, I suppose; but I must hold my ground here. I can't afford to indulge this particular crotchet; and, after all, it will be best for us both that she should see I'm not to be turned round her

finger, charming though she is. And she deserves to be punished just a little for her perversity. Who would have thought it of her? What an awkward business it is altogether! Heigh-ho! I'm not enamoured of my first acquaintance with a lover's quarrel ;' and he heaved something very like a sigh.

Nevertheless, by the time he reached his own garden he had pretty well regained his equanimity. It was easy to make an excuse to Mrs Redgrave for Freda's non-appearance. She had wanted to get back to Hamelford early, and they had lingered too long on the hills. The gowns and collars must stand over till to-morrow.

'And by to-morrow, I suppose,' said Stephen meditatively, as he lounged idly on the bench at the end of the long walk, 'we shall both be admitting that we've made fools of ourselves. Such is life! Indeed I should not be much astonished if we came to this edifying conclusion before to-morrow,' and he glanced up, as he had done a good many times already, along the winding sheep-

track which led down from the moors to the home-paddock. ‘I wonder if she is there still. I’ve half a mind to stroll up and see; It’s awfully slow down here alone. She might be shy of making the first advances, but if she saw me coming to look for her she’d soon take heart of grace. I believe I might have won the battle just now, if I had not been too angry to give her soft words. I didn’t know it was in me to be in such a rage. It’s quite a new experience. Well! she won’t bear me any malice; of that I’m very sure. I’ll go!’

So he remounted the steep path, his eager gaze rather belying the deliberation of his movements, till he reached the crest of the hill commanding a long stretch of moorland. Here he could see right away to the knoll on which they had been sitting. No one was there now. The hill-side was quite deserted. She had gone then, but she might have descended into the lower road, and so found her way to the farm while he was looking for her up here. Vexed

with himself for having run the possible risk of missing her, he hastened back; but he might as well have taken his time. The house and garden lay sleeping in their afternoon repose. He saw only the cowman's boy as he whistled over his weeding in the shrubbery, and Mrs. Redgrave nodding in her chair by the parlour window.

A pamphlet on farming lay on the table; and throwing himself into an arm-chair he tried to read it. He could have found plenty to do, but he was in no humour to attend to any business just then. Presently the setting sun shone in redly through the west window, and dipped below the Melcombe woods. Then the twilight came on, and the evening closed in. She would not come now, but she might write. She was sure to write; and he began to sketch her letter in his mind. Tea came to interrupt him. His mother's placid small-talk and Lottie's chatter secretly fretted him; and more than once Mrs. Redgrave looked up surprised at some sharp reprimand to the child unusual

from his lips. So the evening and the next morning wore slowly away. The post came in at mid-day, and he contrived to be in the way when the letter-carrier turned in at the white gate; but there was nothing in his hand except the County Chronicle, which Stephen took and, as soon as the old man's back was turned, pitched into the duck-pond.

It was very strange! Perhaps she expected him to go to her, or to write; and he took out his pocket-book and began to frame a rough draft; but it would not do. He could say nothing else than he had already said. He had tried both persuasions and upbraiding, and both had failed so far. It was useless to repeat them, and silence might prove more effective than words either written or spoken. There was still another chance, however. Freda's letters, the few there had been of them, had sometimes reached him through a cottager's wife, who lived just beyond the church and went twice or thrice a-week to sell her eggs and butter in Hamelford. She would have been

there to-day, for he had seen her drive her donkey by, with loaded panniers, an hour before. She was sure to be back before dark.

So, when the evening came round again, he took his hat and went through the church-yard to her cottage. Yes! she had come back. She was counting out her money on the table when he looked in at the open door, but she shook her head when he asked if she had anything for him; she had seen Miss Chace in the town, and Miss Chace had seen her, but she had given her no letter to bring back. He turned away, anger and alarm contending for the mastery within him, and went home again. In the hall he found Mrs. Redgrave watering her pet geraniums. She seemed to have been expecting him, for she looked up quickly as he entered and made some casual remark as if to detain him, but he crossed at once to the little sitting-room where he kept his guns and fishing-gear, and generally wrote his letters. Shutting himself in there, he

drew his chair to the table and opened his desk. He would write to Freda, and make up his mind afterwards whether to send the letter. It was not an easy composition, for even the semblance of an apology went against the grain with him; and yet he felt that he must begin by acknowledging that his words had been over-hasty even though he held firmly to his point. He wrote and scratched out and considered, and he had not covered the first page when Mrs. Redgrave came in, bringing with her a basket of peaches. She did not sit down, but began fidgeting with the ornaments on the mantel-piece and pretending to rearrange them. The slight noise disturbed him, and he could not write with her standing there. He dipped his pen into the ink, and then waited, hoping that she would take the hint and go. Instead of doing so, she came round to the other side of the table, and said in a tone betraying some hesitation and uneasiness—

‘Janet Hunt has been to see her mother,

Steenie; and she has brought home such a queer tale. Never was such a place as Hamelford for gossip! They have spread it about that Freda's father is alive, and has turned up, and that she has left her aunt and gone to live with him near the quay. Janet has got it all as pat as possible; and she declares she heard it from Sally at the school-house, when she went round to fetch Lottie's cloak. But, as I tell her, it is sheer nonsense.'

Stephen was glad afterwards to recollect that he had kept his self-possession in that first moment.

'No, it isn't nonsense,' he said deliberately; 'there's something in the story, and I'll tell you about it later, but I don't care much to talk about it just now. To tell the truth, I've a bit of a headache, and I am not good for much talking at present.'

This time Mrs. Redgrave saw that he was only anxious to be left alone; and restraining her curiosity and consternation, like a kind-hearted soul she departed at once. When

the door had closed behind her, Stephen walked to the fireplace with his unfinished letter in his hand, and, tearing it into minute fragments, scattered them among the unlighted wood and coal.

‘They may serve to feed the fire some day,’ he said to himself as they fluttered down; ‘there is no better use for them now.’





C H A P T E R X V I.

‘Hopes have precarious life :
They are oft blighted, withered, snapped sheer off
In vigorous growth, and turned to rottenness.
But faithfulness can feed on suffering,
And knows no disappointment.’

WHEN Paul Chace, on his return, swung himself heavily down from the coach-box at the door of the ‘Three Crowns,’ he was somewhat amazed to find Freda waiting for him there. With a hasty greeting she drew him a little apart from the knot of people gathered on the pavement.

‘I have taken a lodgings,’ she said, addressing him in a rapid excited way. ‘It was the best I could get. They are very respectable people, and I know them well.’

He stared at her for a moment, and then burst into a loud laugh.

'What! didn't you think I was to be trusted to find a berth for myself? Do you fancy you must take me in hand, my dear, and see that my sheets are properly aired? No, no! I haven't knocked about the world nigh upon sixty years for nothing. I can take precious good care of myself, I promise you.'

'It is not that,' explained Freda, shrinking involuntarily from the loud bantering tone audible to the stable helps as they unyoked the horses. 'It is for myself too; Aunt Becky won't keep me any longer.'

He gave a long low whistle—'Whew! that's how the wind sets, is it? Upon my word, that's sharp work and mighty sudden;' and he looked at her as though rather taken aback.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining with unnatural brightness, and there was a parched sound in her voice; but she did not appear dismayed or distressed, and there was no uncertainty about her manner.

'Yes, it is sudden,' she agreed. 'We settled it last night. But it is much best so. Now I can be with you at once and altogether, if you will have me.'

'Have you!' he repeated, recovering from his first amazement. 'I should rather think I would have you. Why, isn't it the very thing I've been hankering after ever since I clapped eyes on you first? Come along, and let's have a look at these new lodgings of ours. I'm as pleased as Punch to have got you all to myself so soon.'

There could be no question indeed about his unfeigned satisfaction, as, catching up his bag and throwing his pilot coat across his shoulder, he consigned his boxes to the landlord's care, and prepared to accompany her on the instant. And she,—whatever might be working in her secret soul,—she stepped along beside him with a free firm tread, meeting quite unabashed the inquisitive glances of the townspeople, as though she would fain proclaim to them one and all that she was ready to acknowledge

this uncouth gold-digger as her father before the whole world.

'And now let me hear all about it,' said Paul, when they were once within their new domicile, and looking out together on the busy quay and the harbour beyond. 'Of course the old lady took offence at your showing me favour—just like her spite.'

'She gave me fair warning,' said Freda quietly; 'I have not any reason to complain, even if I had wanted to stay with her.'

'Fair warning, indeed!' exclaimed Paul, 'turning you out at a day's notice. Well, never you mind, my girl. It shall go hard but I'll give you as good a home as ever you've had with her; and as long as I've a crust left you may be sure of the larger half of it. So don't you be afraid.'

She looked at him steadily.

'I am not afraid. I did it with my eyes open; and as for Aunt Becky, she will not be sorry to be quit of me.'

'Then it seems all parties are suited,' quoth Paul jocosely; 'but stop a minute,'

and his countenance fell; 'I'm getting on too fast, I fancy. I was thinking I'd got you altogether, and I was forgetting all about this fine sweetheart. I shan't keep you long, after all; for didn't your aunt tell me you were going to be married in a week or two?'

Freda had evidently been prepared for this question.

'Yes, she thought so; but she was wrong. We have changed our minds. We are *not* going to be married.'

Her father turned round and looked at her sharply.

'Not going to be married!' he echoed; 'why, she told me it was settled, and that you were almost as good as wed. The ring and the clothes ready, and what not. Was that all moonshine?'

'No, it was true enough; but there's many a slip, you know, between the cup and the lip,' she made answer, with a brave show of indifference.

'And it's all off? is that what you mean to tell me?'

'Yes, it's all off,' assented she. 'You must take me for good, father, if you take me at all. Nobody else wants me.'

He stood awhile as if pondering, his shrewd deep-set eyes thoughtfully regarding her. Then he said abruptly,—

'I begin to see light. This chap—this Redgrave, if that's his name—has played you false. Jilted you because I've showed my nose here, instead of dying of yellow Jack sixteen years ago, as I ought to have done.'

'No, he has not jilted me,' she replied calmly. 'It was my own doing altogether.'

'What! didn't you care for him then? Were you tired of him?'

The tell-tale colour rushed into her face, and Paul Chace read in it a sufficient answer.

'I'll give you a bit of advice, Freda, and it's the same that your good aunt gave you t'other night. You'd best have nought to do with me. As she told you, I bring harm wherever I go.'

He spoke very bitterly, but she, standing before him, took his hand in hers.

‘ You must not say that. You may do me good in many ways. It will be something worth living for if we can help each other.’

‘ Tell me how you fell out with the fellow,’ he demanded. ‘ I want to hear, though I can make a pretty fair guess.’

‘ He did not see things as I did : and he is a proud man. It is far best for him as it is.’

Once long ago, when he was already past his first youth, Paul Chace had loved a woman and had lost her, not by death. The memory of that half-forgotten time came back to him now, as he realised that he had cost his young daughter her lover. But though his heart had its kindly impulses, he was by nature and long habit a selfish man, minded to do always what pleased him best. And he was very loth to give her up,—to lose the new sense of satisfaction he was beginning to feel in her gentle company, and to afford a triumph to his ancient foe, her aunt Rebecca. Moreover, there was within him just now a hot resentment prompting him to pay back

Stephen's insolent scorn by robbing him of his intended bride.

He urged her no further on her own behalf, but, putting his hand on her shoulder, he said heartily—

‘Then it’s a bargain, is it, that we hold together? I think somehow we shall manage to rub along, though I’m a cross-grained fellow at times, and there’s something about your ways different enough from mine; but if you’ll put up with me, I’ll try and mend my manners.’

He said this last with a certain awkwardness; and then, as if impatient to shake off his own embarrassment, he added cheerily,—

‘And now I’ll go and look after my traps, and we’ll make ourselves as snug as we can here till we’ve made up our minds where to settle down.’

That afternoon, as Freda was moving about, mostly in silence, disposing his properties and her own in their narrow little sitting-room, and he, leaning against the mantelpiece, was watching her proceedings, he suddenly took

his pipe out of his mouth, puffed out a volume of smoke, and exclaimed—

‘I’ll tell you what: I’ve half a mind to carry you back with me to New South Wales. I’m more at home in those parts than I am here nowadays, and it isn’t half a bad country. What do you say, Freda, to crossing the water, and trying what a settler’s life is like?’

Perhaps he had rather looked for a protest; but her face, as she turned it towards him, expressed no unwillingness.

‘I am ready to go wherever you like. I am not at all afraid to try a strange country. I used often to wish to get away from here. Let us go; there is nothing to keep us.’

‘Stop, stop,’ said he laughing. ‘Not quite so fast. I must turn it over a bit in my mind. I had some thoughts, as I told you, of settling down for the rest of my days here at home. But I’ve got a hatful of money, more than I shall quite know how to spend, and I might do a good thing in sheep-farming out there. Well, I must sleep over it.’

Presently he got up, and said he would

go and stretch his legs, and look about him a little before dusk. Left alone, Freda too rose from before the cupboard at which she had been kneeling, and stood for a few moments in deep thought, gazing absently before her.

‘ If I write to him at all, it must be now, —at once. Shall I ? Ought I to tell him some of the thoughts that were in my mind after he left me yesterday ? Ought I to tell him that I am caring for his happiness now as I would have done if I had been his wife, and that I *know*, for his sake, we must be parted. That is what I thought I would say last night ; but if I did, it might bring him here, and then if he pressed me again I might be weak, I might tell him too much, and make it worse for him to bear. It is better to be silent. He will know very soon what I have done, if he does not know already, and then he will be very angry, and when his anger is past he will forget me. He can forget. If only I could ! If only I could !’

The low cry sounded like a wail of despair, and, with an almost convulsive movement, she covered her eyes with her hand. It was long before she withdrew it, but when she did the agony was past, her face had settled back into calmness; and her father coming in an hour later only noticed that the pink flush had faded out of her cheeks, and that she looked pale and heavy-eyed.

'Yes, I am very tired,' she owned when they were separating for the night, and he told her, with a rough sort of tenderness, that she looked quite done for,—'but I shall be fresher in the morning.'

She had thought that she would fall asleep at once, but sleep did not come. Rather her mind seemed wrought up to an unnatural pitch of excited activity and clearness. She was not wretched now. She could think of her own story almost as if it had been told of some one else; nay, sometimes she doubted whether it could really be she, Freda Chace, who was lying on this strange bed, with no earthly friend or protector but the

father who three days ago was a mere myth to her.

But he at least was real, he was there ; she could even then hear his heavy breathings through the thin partition wall; while her aunt and little Lottie, ay and Stephen too, had gone from her as utterly as the mother whose white lips she could dimly remember to have kissed fifteen years ago. The ground had opened beneath her feet and swallowed them up, and left no trace. Another week, a day or two even, might find her journeying to the uttermost parts of the earth, never to see, never to hear of them again.

There was something tremendous in the suddenness of the change that had befallen her. Something terrible in seeing the curtain dropped between her and her past, between her and her future that was to have been ; and yet, for all this, she was *not* terrified, as she meditated through the long hours, even though she knew right well that she was about to travel along an untried road that might be full of snares and pitfalls. It

seemed to her as if this night she were possessed by an altogether new spirit, inspired by new motives. Hitherto she had craved for love, even when, fighting against the craving, she had tried desperately to stifle it in other aims and hopes. And the love had come, she had tasted of its sweets, and lo! they had turned to ashes in her mouth. Henceforth she would be content to give, asking for nothing again.

In the new life that lay before her she did not for a moment count on her father's affection as her support. Some instinct told her plainly, as it had whispered darkly to him, that they were too unlike in nature and in habits for much sympathy and union. She did not count on her own tenderness for him. It might be slow of growth, it might be often nipped and chilled by the secret clashing of their two minds; but there was one thing that could not fail her. The spirit of self-sacrifice should brace her to bear all trials, to face all difficulties that this new service might entail upon her; and

that same spirit might shed upon her future a holier light than happiness.

'I can do it,' she thought within herself as she lay, with locked hands, motionless in the darkness. 'I know that I have the will; I think I have the power; and when he has become a better man through my means, it will have been worth living for—worth suffering for. And if it had not been for the suffering, I might not have been strong. "As iron is tempered by the furnace;" I know now what that must mean. And what does it matter whether I am happy? there are higher things than being happy—higher things even than being beloved. My eyes are opened at last. I have been in a dream, and now I am awakened.'

And yet in all her thoughts there was not one movement of anger against Stephen. Not one murmur because his love had been weighed in the balance, and had been found wanting. She had promised him that he should never repent having chosen her, and, so far as in her lay, she had kept her

word. She had set him free so soon as the tie between them had threatened to disturb his peace : he would never have to blush for her or her kin.

The morning broke, and the rising sun was still struggling through the autumn mists, when she arose, wearied in body but strong in spirit, to meet the new duties that might lie ready to her hand. But she was to have a breathing space. The mists had only just dispersed, and the ripples in the harbour were but beginning to glitter in the sunshine, as she stood at the open window an hour later, watching her father down the street. He was certainly a fine-looking man in spite of his sixty years. So she thought to herself as he marched along, his head thrown back, and his powerful figure as upright as if he were still in the prime of life. Not a man to pass unnoticed any day. But there was something too much of a swagger in his gait as he shouldered his way among the country people who were carrying in their supplies to market. Many such stopped to look after

him; more than one whispered to his neighbour that this was the man who had been set down for dead nigh upon twenty years. He was off for a long walk, a day's expedition to the other side of the moor, to hunt up an old friend of whom he had got wind.

'He used to be something of a loose fish,' he had said to Freda just before he started; 'but birds of a feather flock together, you know, and he'll have sobered down by this time, like the rest of us. They tell me he is doing well on a small farm he rents out there.'

So Freda was left to her own devices. She need not go out; the baker's wife, with whom they lodged, had offered to make provision for them; and so, dragging a cumbrous arm-chair near the window, she settled herself there. All through that long day she sat with her hands lying idly in her lap, gazing out on the glassy waters, where the trading smacks lay moored along the quay-side, and the small fishing-boats danced to and fro

homeward or outward bound. She was not thinking now; she was too utterly spent, mind and body, to do more than take in passively the sights and sounds around her. Now and again her eyes slowly closed, and then she dreamt, and the lines of her face softened, and it grew as tranquil as if she were a little child. That long, silent rest refreshed and revived her. When the evening brought her father back, she was ready to greet him with a cheerful alacrity, in which he at least saw no sign of effort. He was glad to be home again, exclaiming, as he stretched his length upon the horse-hair sofa, that he was dead beat, and had not found his land legs yet; and he acquiesced, with obvious content, in her arrangements for his supper, remarking with a broad smile that he began to think women were worth something after all.

‘It’s a longish tramp over to Moriston,’ he observed presently. ‘Above seven miles, I should say; and I went on a good step beyond. Tom Horne took me round to see an old

house belonging to his landlord. An odd rambling place it is, on the top of the cliff, and so near the edge that you could almost pitch a stone out of your bedroom window into the sea at high water. Whether it's owing to that, or to its being so far from any town, I can't say; but, anyway, it wouldn't let, and has been standing empty now for a couple of years or more, and the owner—he's a squire somewhere in Cornwall—is willing to let it go for an old song. It has a fair bit of land belonging to it, and it took my fancy, for all it's rather out of repair. So I thought I'd go back to the agent in Moriston, and make a bid for it. And, would you believe it! he was ready to jump down my throat, closed with me like a shot, and said I might take possession any day. There, I haven't let the grass grow under my feet, have I?' And he threw himself back and looked at her triumphantly.

Freda looked back at him, scarcely able to believe her own ears.

'I thought,' she said, 'that we were going

to leave England. That was your plan yesterday.'

'Why, yes. I did say something about it, I know; but, you see, it isn't often I'm in the same mind two days running. I'm as apt to shift and change as the weather; and when I came to consider it, I wasn't so smitten with the notion. It's one thing to rough it in those parts alone, and quite another thing to have a girl with you. Now here you may live in clover, and have the best of everything; and, as Tom Horne says, I can do something in the old horse-dealing line, if I've a mind to it. I always had a hankering to have a turn at that trade again, so it would have been a pity to let such a good chance slip.'

'And you have really bought the house?'

'Ay; 'twas all settled in less than half an hour.'

It was plain that Tom Horne's suggestions had been made to willing ears, and that the deed was done past undoing. Freda only asked one question—

'I can't quite understand whereabouts it is. Is it beyond Moriston?'

'Well, not exactly. It lies something in this way,' and taking out a pencil stump, he made a rough plan on a scrap of newspaper. 'Moriston lies inland, you know, on the slope of the moor, and trouble enough I had to find it. There is the sea-line. If you drop into the valley, and then climb the opposite hill and so strike away northward, you get to Lion Point—that's what they call it—something under the hour. You can see it many a mile away, it stands so high; but it has good thick walls to keep out wind and weather.'

The two or three marks he had made told Freda what she cared far more to know than the thickness of the walls at Lion Point. The house lay west of Hamelford, while Hawkstone was south-east; but the western cliffs formed a deep bay, and it could scarcely be more than six or seven miles, as the crow flies, from door to door. Still, with six miles of moor between them, she might live there

without troubling Stephen or coming in his way.

On her father that question as to Stephen had not once dawned. He had been so used to following out his own whims, that it appeared to him the most natural thing in the world that he should have clinched this matter without waiting to consult his daughter. And yet he had been thinking of her a good part of the way home, trying to contrive comforts for her, and to map out their future life as pleasantly as he knew how to do. She should have a garden on the south side of the house (women always liked a garden), well sheltered from the sharp sea-winds, and he would buy plenty of furniture, and bright curtains and carpets to make the house itself cheery and comfortable in her eyes. So he told her now, taking an evident delight in devising all the details.

'I'll be off to Exeter to-morrow,' he wound up by saying, 'and I'll forage about in the shops there, and pick up what I can to furbish up the old place; and we'll get into it before

many weeks are over. I hate low poky rooms like these ;' glancing contemptuously round their tiny apartment. ' There isn't room to stretch oneself here, and I like to have plenty of room. What's the good of money if you don't make use of it ? I've worked precious hard for mine, and now we'll enjoy it together. And, Freda, you must look about for a servant-maid. That's not in my line ; but I don't mean to have my daughter peeling potatoes and scrubbing floors, like any drudge.'

So he went on ; and amid all his boasting talk there ran a vein of fatherly pride and kindness.

As he had truly said, he was not disposed to let the grass grow under his feet. He was off to Exeter betimes the next day, promising to return as soon as ever he could complete his business there. He half proposed to take Freda with him ; but she saw that his heart was not greatly set upon her going, and elected to be left behind.

She could, and she did rouse herself in his presence, but she paid for the effort afterwards; and a sense of languor, quite new to her, made it an untold relief to be left to pass these first days in solitude.

As she sat hour after hour gazing out over the smooth waters of the harbour and the open sea beyond, or watching the red sunsets, and the stars coming out one by one in the dark heavens as the autumn night drew on, as she sat thus she communed sometimes within herself whether she could have done anything to hinder their going to Lion Point, to bring him back to his first scheme of carrying her abroad. It was not for herself only that she would fain have ordered things so. She had, besides, a strong misgiving that the pursuits so alluring to her father might be as full of dangerous temptation to him now as they were said to have proved in other days. Had some lurking wish or weakness, all undetected by herself, led her into a too easy compliance?

It might be so, but her inward debate always ended in a conviction that she had done well to hold her peace.

The knowledge she had already gained of her father's character told her that he was not a man to be easily thwarted or turned aside from the humour of the hour, far less to be balked in a fixed plan. A man who might perhaps be led, but never driven; and who could only be led by dint of much wisdom and much patience. A false step on her part in these early days might call out the waywardness lying dormant in him, and deal at once a death-blow to her influence.

So much her observation had taught her in the few hours they had passed together. She could hardly have put her conclusions into words. A year ago she might have been blind to such slight signs as were conveyed in a trick of voice, a change of countenance, the chance wording of a sentence; but, of late, her perceptions had become painfully acute.

No! she must do the best she could. She must swim with the tide or against it, meeting each wave as it arose to buffet her. Who could tell but that, with faith and fortitude supporting her, she might win her way through every storm to a safe landing at last?





C H A P T E R X V I I.

' Yet in his worst pursuits I ween
That sometimes there did intervene
Pure hopes of high intent.'

HE leaves of the apple-trees that overhung the garden wall at Lion Point had been touched by the first frost, and were fluttering slowly down through the still air as Freda and her father drew up before the outer gateway one clear October afternoon. A quaint old gateway it was, built perhaps a hundred years before, and out of all proportion to the low stone wall which abutted on it on either side, enclosing a small grass-grown court. A coach and four might once have driven in under the broad massive arch; but some modern tenant had erected beneath it a common

wicket, too narrow to admit the light gig in which Paul Chace had driven his daughter over from Hamelford. So they alighted, and, leaving the old gardener to take the horse round to the stable, they walked together up the paved path leading straight across the courtyard to the solid square building opposite.

To the left of this path there stood an old elm, once a large tree, but now so decayed that only one or two of the larger branches and the trunk remained. Other trees there were none, save two close-cropped yews which kept guard on either side of the front door, and a few fruit-trees in the orchard behind. The front door now stood open, and within it the old servant-woman whom Freda had engaged was waiting to receive them. She was no stranger, for it was she who had been with Mrs. Cameron in her last days, and she had a hearty word of welcome for Freda now, as she led the way into the wide passage, with its long wooden bench and capacious fire-place. Beyond was a large low room, panelled from floor to

ceiling, and lighted by one deep mullioned window. On this room Paul especially prided himself, for he had spent much time and pains upon its furniture; and certainly it did him credit this autumn afternoon, as the light from the blazing wood fire crackling in the grate danced merrily on the red drugget and stained floor, and on the thick woollen window-hangings.

‘There!’ said he as they entered, turning round to Freda with a confident smile, ‘Who’d wish to see a more cosy parlour than this? No lady in the land need be ashamed to sit here, I take it,’ and he looked around him with infinite content.

It was the first time Freda had seen it, for he had been bent on preparing for her a surprise, and he had quite succeeded. She had pictured to herself a forlorn and cheerless abode, and had secretly mistrusted his vaunted powers of adorning it; and she looked about her now with no feigned admiration, while he proceeded to point out the various contents of the chamber.

'See,' there's an easy-chair. You can sit there whenever you're disposed to nap over the fire; and that sofa in the corner is mighty comfortable, for I tried it myself; it's as soft as a feather-bed; and yon table under the window is for your writing, if you ever do any: there's a deep drawer in it that'll hold pens and paper and the like; and what else is there?—oh! to be sure,' dragging forward out of a dark corner a small lady's work-table, and setting it down exultingly before her.

'Look at that! I caught sight of it in an old furniture shop, and I went in and bought it on the spot. I knew women always like to be fiddling-faddling over their bits of needle-work, and that's the right sort of article to hold it, I fancy.'

'To be sure it is,' said Freda, smiling, and looking at him gratefully. 'You've thought of everything. How much trouble you must have taken!'

'Tut, tut, the trouble's nothing; and I don't grudge either that or the money, so long as

you're pleased ; and now let's have a look round upstairs.'

Upstairs the aspect of the house was not quite so inviting. The white dimity which, as Paul had been informed, was the right thing for Freda's chamber, and which had been sewn by Mrs. Carter's willing fingers, looked chilly against the dead drab paint of the walls, and the room was somewhat sombre in spite of another bright fire burning there ; while just outside it, a long wide passage, with a ghostly echo, extended from one end to another of the house. Paul's own rooms were but scantily furnished, for, as he half jestingly half scornfully remarked, 'he didn't care for gimcracks and rattletraps.'

Two or three other doors which Freda opened led into unfurnished rooms.

'We don't want these now,' explained her father, 'so I left them alone ; but we can easily rig them up any day. We might almost quarter a regiment here, if we liked ;' and he stepped on, with all the conscious pride of possession.

The house, large as it was, contained but two stories; and an odd little winding stair brought them at last down into the great kitchen, full of all manner of queer nooks and cupboards, with a huge brewing-vat built into one corner, one low door leading into a wash-house beyond, and another to the back yard where the pigsties and stable were to be found. Here, in the kitchen, an array of crockery was already disposed upon the shelves, and a leg of mutton was roasting on the spit.

And so presently they found their way round again into the hall, and past the broad shallow front staircase, with its heavy railings, into Freda's parlour, as her father chose to call it. They were not to have their meals here: another room was set apart for that purpose, nearer to the kitchen. They sat down together, the father and daughter, and talked of the house, and of the life they should lead upon this solitary hill. It need not be very solitary for Paul. Freda had not now to hear for the first time that it was a short three

miles over hill and dale to Moriston ; and that, moreover, there was a young colt coming over for him to break the next day, and on which he reckoned to carry him hither and thither. But he was not unmindful of her, for he began to tell her that Tom Horne's wife was a good-hearted pleasant-spoken woman, who would be glad to see her at Moriston whenever she liked to find her way over there.

'And there are some young lasses too, daughters of the agent, who you'd best make friends with. You might get them to spend a day up here, now and again, when you feel a bit dull.' Freda smiled and shook her head.

'I'm not much given to feeling dull for want of company. I never was. When I was a little girl I didn't care for any playfellows, except —' She stopped short, for she had already been betrayed into saying more than she meant.

'Except who ?' asked her father, regarding her with some curiosity.

She hesitated for a second, and then quietly finished her sentence.

'Except Mark Cameron.'

'Eh!' exclaimed he, prolonging the word, and then leaning forward eagerly and with a remarkable change of expression. 'Do you mean Robert's son? But of course you do. My wits must have been wool-gathering, for I'd clean forgotten that the old lady took herself off to Hamelford with your mother; and yet I've wondered a good many times whether that little fellow lived to grow up. So you know him, do you? Tell me about him,' he added with unusual earnestness. 'I want to hear what kind of chap he is.'

And Freda, marvelling a little at the keen interest he evinced, began to frame her description as best she could. 'He is rather tall, not very, and has a dark face and bright eyes.'

Paul nodded.

'Just like his father. That might stand for a picture of Robert as he was when first I knew him. Well, go on.'

'He is silent generally, and he is hot-tempered, or at least he used to be; but he was very kind to all weak things, and he was afraid of nothing.'

'You say, "was." What's become of him now?' questioned Paul.

'He went to sea. His heart was always set on being a sailor, so his grandmother would not say a word against it, though she would have been glad I think if he had taken to some trade instead.'

'Does he ever come to Hamelford?'

'He has only been once for a day or two since his grandmother died. He won't be coming again. He said so then.'

'And you and he used to be playmates,' Paul said musingly. 'How strangely things come about! His father and I were hand and glove together at one time.'

'Were you?' said Freda. She had never understood that Mark's father and hers had been close allies. She had thought that the friendship had lain chiefly on her mother's side.

'Ay,' returned Paul briefly. Then after a pause, 'I should like to see the lad—to do him a good turn if I could. I wish he had not gone away.'

To this Freda had no answer to make, neither did she question her father as to that last sad passage in Robert Cameron's history of which she had heard only from Mark. Presently Paul got up and went off to smoke his pipe out of doors, and then she too wrapped her shawl round her, and sallied out to look abroad before it grew dusk. The gateway by which they had entered faced towards the land; but once outside it she turned sharply to the right, and two minutes brought her, as her father had said, to the edge of the cliff.

It was a strange site to have chosen for a house; but the story ran that it had been built by some old sea-captain, who fancied that he should die the easier with the breaking waves and whistling winds sounding in his ears as he lay helpless in his bed. To-day, however, there was hardly breeze enough to fill the sails of the returning fishing-boats, and the sea was creeping with a soft and monotonous murmur over the sands far below. And yet, even on this

mild autumn afternoon, it was a grand sight. So Freda thought, as she stood gazing. Almost as far as the eye could reach, the red sandstone cliffs rose sheer to a great height, only broken here and there by a rent or chasm. Such a chasm lay almost at her feet, so choked above by abundant vegetation, and below by huge boulders and fragments of rock fallen from the cliffs around that it was hard to trace the thread-like path that led down to the sandy beach.

A furlong out at sea there rose, amidst the still waters, a bare and rugged rock, round which the sea-gulls wheeled by hundreds. Freda had heard of this great rock, 'Bernard's Peril' as it was called, but she had never till now seen it. As she looked at it, half-forgotten tales came thronging to her mind of ships that had gone to pieces in bad weather, beating against those cruel grey crags. Then her eyes slowly turned inland. To her right, as she stood now with her back towards the sea, the cliff ended abruptly in the gorge down which

she had been looking ; but to the left and away before her, green pasture-land, cropped close by the sheep, rose and fell in hollows and hillocks until it melted soon into the long sweep of the now russet moorland. Not a single building was in sight save the house from which she had just come, flanked by its two fields.

Moriston lay hidden under a shoulder of the downs, and even the beacon at St. Mary's Head could not be descried. She might have been hundreds of miles away from Hamelford, away from any human beings except the two who made up the household at Lion Point. And yet she had no special feeling of loneliness ; nay rather she felt a strange relief in this solitary place, and drank in the pure air with a sense of bodily refreshment, all the greater in that she had been living lately shut up in two small rooms. She would willingly have lingered there longer to watch the sun go down into the ocean ; but she heard her father's whistle, and turned towards the house. She met him by the garden wall

coming to seek her, and eager to show her the sheltered corner where she might grow some hardy flowers. He would have been amazed had he known how much less attractive to her was this level plat of turf, encircled with overgrown shrubs, than the open cliff she had just left. But she was careful not to disappoint him, and listened while he explained, as far as his slight gardening experience allowed, what might be done there by planting and digging. But before they went indoors she turned back once again to the edge of the cliff. The sun had set, and had left a long line of yellow light upon the sea. It was nearly high tide, and the rippling waves were lapping the cliffs with a hardly audible sound. There was a wonderful stillness and silence on earth and sea and sky.

Paul looked into his daughter's pale absorbed face, well pleased.

'You like it,' he said, his own loud tones sinking involuntarily into some harmony with the quiet around. 'I am glad of that. I was

half afraid you might think it a lonesome dreary spot.' Then, as she lifted her eyes to his in mute protest, he added, 'You're not like your mother; she had many a bone to pick with me for taking her to live in a heaven-forsaken place, as she used to call the old farm beyond Althorpe; but then she was always ready to get up a grievance; she'd a smack of Aunt Rebecca about her as to that.'

'I don't think you should blame her to me,' said Freda gently.

It was a bold stroke, but he did not take it amiss; on the contrary, he rejoined very good-temperedly—

'Perhaps you're right. She's dead and gone now, and can't take her own part; and if she'd lived, she'd have made out some sort of case for herself, I don't doubt.'

'Why did you leave her?'

The girl put the question with some hesitation. She wanted to know the real quarrel between them, and yet she did not feel sure that she had a right to ask, or that

he would choose to answer. He did answer, but this time not quite so readily.

'I'd reason enough, but it's no good raking up old scores. She hadn't made my home too pleasant to me for one thing; but I never meant her to come to poverty. I left her all I had, and I'd hardly a penny in my pocket when I landed in New York; I'd have sent her over as much as ever I could have spared if she'd only chosen to let me hear of her. Well, let bygones be bygones. It's time we were turning in, I'm thinking.'

That evening, when Freda was busy mending some of his garments in the parlour, with her work-table at her elbow, and he sitting on the opposite side of the fire was holding forth about Australia, he stopped rather suddenly and left the room. He soon returned, however, with something small carefully wrapped in tissue paper in his hand. Coming close up to her, he unfastened the little packet and took out a worn silver thimble, which he held tenderly,

almost reverently, between his finger and thumb.

'Try it,' said he, handing it to her. 'Will it fit you?'

Yes, it fitted her perfectly, as he saw when she put it on.

'I thought it would. Then you may keep it and wear it. It has been with me all over the world. I'd sooner have lost a hundred pounds any day than that bit of silver; and I meant to have it buried with me when I died. But I'll give it to you. I shall like to see it on your finger when you sit there working.'

'It was your sister Milly's?' Freda asked.

'Ay! many's the hour, when I lay ill with a bad sprain, a lad of sixteen or so, that I've watched that thimble glancing in the firelight as she sat sewing by my bed. When I got well, and went off to London to make my first start in life, I said she must let me have it as a keepsake, and I'd give her a bran new one instead; and so I did; and I've had this ever since. It's been in a

good many queer places in its time, and I verily believe the sight of it has kept me straight more often than anything else, though that's not saying much.'

'I'm not sure that I ought to let you give it away,' said Freda, smiling rather sadly.

'Yes, yes! I shall get sight of it still, you know, and it will do me good to think you have Milly's thimble. You're very like her sometimes—very!!'

There was something pathetic in the contrast between this touch of deep tenderness and the coarse rough nature of the man; and it kept alive in Freda the hope and belief that the better part in him might yet prevail, and that he might be weaned from the habits of his former life,—kept it alive even when she became aware (as she did before they had been long at Lion Point) that his old tastes were not dead, nor his old failings conquered. When she saw him now and again heavy with drink she would not lose heart; she caught at his own excuse, made with some shame after his first lapse,

that it was one of the bad tricks of his bush life.

'But don't you take fright, Freda,' he had added; 'you're not going to have a drunken father on your hands. Only, you know, when a man gets among old friends he's apt sometimes to take a drop too much. It won't happen again.'

Nevertheless it did happen again, from time to time; and the friends, as he had said, had a good deal to do with it. Tom Horne himself was an easy-going jolly yeoman, a bit of a wag in his way, and dubbed a good fellow by all his many acquaintances, spite of a rather elastic conscience. Alone he would have done Paul no great harm, beyond inciting him to some hazardous speculations in horseflesh; but his house was a favourite resort for idle characters, with most of whom his new guest soon struck up more or less of an intimacy. Nor was it long before these began occasionally to find their way over to Lion Point.

'I'm not going to plague you with them,' Paul said once to Freda, in the sort of half-

apologetic tone he sometimes adopted. ‘One or two of them are queerish customers, and I wouldn’t care to have them getting in your way. I’d sooner give them a wide berth at once, though it’s not an over and above easy thing to do. But they can come and go by the stable-yard without troubling you.’

‘I mean to try and make you so content at home that you won’t want them,’ Freda rejoined cheerfully. ‘I don’t despair of your reaching that happy condition some day.’

He shook his head rather mournfully.

‘Perhaps, when I’m paralytic or bedridden; not before I’m afraid. The leopard can’t change his spots, as they say, and I couldn’t sit by the chimney-corner all day, even with you, Freda, though I’m fonder of you than you may think.’

She recalled those words of his that same evening, as she watched him asleep in his arm-chair. He was fond of her; he had said so, and she was *not* fond of him. She wondered whether she was unlike other human beings, in feeling no real impulse

of love towards her father. She could wait on him, take thought for him; nay, the one steady purpose of her life now was to be serviceable to him; but to love him—that was past her power. And yet, to save him from himself, she was ready to do anything.

At first, as Paul proposed, she saw little of his visitors beyond now and then meeting one or other of them in the passage leading to his den at the rear of the house, or watching them from afar strolling about the grass fields, inspecting the live stock; but this was only at first. In a little while it came into her head that her way with him might be plainer if she knew something of these comrades of his. How it might affect her she cared not at all. She had put aside all concern for herself that day when she sat among the heather on the moor, and watched Stephen's receding figure.

Old Betty Carter, however, was by no means over-pleased when she saw her young mistress lingering for a few minutes' chat in the sunshine with a roystering sea-captain,

or patting the sleek sides of the chestnut mare under the eyes of some sporting farmer. Nay, she even ventured a remonstrance.

'You're young,' she said plaintively, one day when Freda was helping in the bread-baking, 'and you don't take thought; but them yonder isn't the sort of folks for the likes of you to consort with. I ax your pardon if I'm over-bold, Miss Freda, but I've known ye since ye was the height of yon table, and I must speak my mind, even if so be as I offend ye.'

'You won't offend me,' said Freda indifferently; 'only, Betty, it isn't at all worth fidgeting about. It doesn't harm me to talk to these people, and it doesn't harm anyone else. And I've reason for doing it. I want to learn about those things my father cares for.'

'He ought to be ashamed to let them come nigh you,' broke out Betty indignantly. 'Why, that Ned Greig—him with the grey hair and brown coat—has been had up more than once at Storleigh to my knowledge for cheating the Custom-house, and he'll rattle

off oaths by the dozen, for I've heard him myself.'

'I know,' said Freda uneasily. 'But they aren't all like him—he's the worst of them, Betty.'

'And he'd need to be! But the rest are no great shakes.'

'I don't think father likes Ned Greig much,' pursued Freda.

'Then why does he have him here, I should like to know?' retorted Betty. 'He could be rid of him, I suppose, if he chose.'

'Not very easily just now. There's a sort of partnership between them about some of these horses, and till the Storleigh races are over they will have a good deal of business together.'

'They may have as much business as they like, it makes no odds to me,' returned Betty tartly. 'If only that Ned will keep his distance, and not come poking his ugly nose here. Let them settle their business at Moriston, say I;' and her speech subsided into

a grunt of dissatisfaction as she carried off her batch of loaves to the oven.

Paul himself, in spite of his words to Freda, was not altogether sorry to see her civil to his cronies when they met. But still some troublesome scruples were at work within him, reminding him that they were no choice associates for a girl, and that he was after all but a careless guardian for his fair young daughter. And sometimes, prompted by this consciousness, he would make a vigorous effort to free himself from the ties that bound him, and to begin afresh the quiet home habits they had planned together when novelty had given them a charm.





CHAPTER XVIII.

'If she be not so to me,
What care I how fair she be?'

PAUL CHACE had been as good as his word, and £500 of his earnings were promptly lodged in Miss Morton's name in Hamelford Bank, as a set-off for the charges she had been at for Freda. She did not refuse the money, but she did not indulge one whit the less in abuse of Paul, and in tirades against the ingratitude of the world at large and nieces in particular. Hadn't she brought Freda up as if she were her own ever since she was a baby, when but for her she might have gone to the workhouse? And now the girl had turned about and left her, without so much as a thank you. And how was she, a

woman long past fifty and in poor health too, to manage all those children? Never was anyone used as she had been. It suited her to ignore the fact that Paul's £500 made the schoolkeeping no longer any sort of necessity, although indeed this became sufficiently obvious, when soon afterwards the school was closed, and the little girls carried their books and work-bags to a humbler seminary lower down the street. It suited her also to forget that, if events had fallen out otherwise, she would still have been deprived of Freda's services.

She only chose to recall the marriage that would have been, in so far as to lament, with shaking head to her neighbours and acquaintance, that any niece of hers should have broken faith with a gentleman like Mr. Redgrave, and he so foolishly fond of her too. People did say that he'd never held up his head since. This piteous description might, in her eyes, shed some lustre on the Morton family, but it was entirely a work of imagination, for Aunt Rebecca had no opportunity of judging

as to Stephen's condition, until one misty December day when she almost ran against him in the doorway of the Bank. It was impossible for him to avoid her, even if he had meant to do so, but he did not seem to have any such impulse. There might be a shade more colour than usual in his cheeks, and his greeting was as stiff an one as it was in his nature to give; but he held open the swing-door courteously for her to pass through, and then running down the Bank-steps mounted his horse and rode off. Miss Morton could not have honestly avowed after this that he looked thin or pale, or like a love-sick swain. And yet, if she could have read his thoughts as he turned his horse's head towards Hawkstone, she would have known that he carried a sore heart with him.

'What a fool I am!' he muttered to himself, breaking into a gallop to relieve the oppression of his feelings. 'Any other man would snap his fingers at a girl who had treated him as that girl has treated me. And yet the mere

sight of this withered old aunt of hers sets my heart beating just as if I were a Miss in her teens. I, too, who always scoffed at blighted affections and all such sentimental stuff. Pshaw ! what nonsense it is, after all ! When a man's got a good house over his head and plenty of money in his pocket, and when he's the use of his brains and his limbs, and can go straight across country and bring down his bird, why on earth should he be puling and pining for a pair of soft eyes and a winsome woman's face ? There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, saith the old proverb. Why can't I believe it, and try my luck again elsewhere ? Many people would tell me I've had a lucky escape, and may do much better ; but I can't see it yet. I wonder what change of scene would do for me : that's what the doctors mostly recommend, I fancy, in cases like mine. But then that's for the womankind : they don't contemplate the possibility of men making such idiots of themselves. There ! ' as he came to the brow of the hill and got the first

glimpse of the Hawkstone meadows, with their grazing cattle and well-fed sheep, and the trout stream winding among them like a silver line —‘there’s a sight which ought to be enough to console a man for a good deal; but that afternoon’s work up here on the moors has taken the taste out of everything. I wonder what her game really was? Whether she trusted to my giving in sooner or later, if she held out; or whether she really couldn’t bring herself to eat humble pie, for she’s as proud as Lucifer, I do believe; or whether —but what’s the good of wondering? I’ve wondered a hundred times already, and nothing’s come of it. Of one thing I’m pretty sure, and that is that she cared for me. She wasn’t one to say it if she didn’t mean it, and her eyes and lips told me that pretty tale very often during those summer months. What a pleasant time it was while it lasted! And it will never come back again! It wouldn’t be the same thing now, even if we were to make it up and start afresh; and there’s not the ghost of a chance of our

doing that. What can have possessed that scamp to settle down in these parts? It's as good as defying me to my face; and she—she might have had the grace to take herself and him a few miles further off.'

But here Snowdrop began to resent the too frequent application of the spur, and demanded his rider's whole attention. Stephen felt jaded and weary when he threw the reins to his man at the door, and turned into his own house. The pretty quaint parlour looked as inviting as ever in the warm fire-glow, but it had lost its charm for him, and he almost hated the familiar surroundings.

Lottie sprang up from the hearth-rug with an eager exclamation, and the black-and-tan terrier on her knee careered round with joyous barks; but the welcome of child and dog only irritated him, and he answered shortly to Mrs. Redgrave's placid inquiries as to his doings in Hamelford. He was out of sorts with the world altogether. He took up a book, but it was one that he had read with Freda, and he came upon

some pencil marks of hers, and threw it down again. He thought he would smoke, and he strolled out into the fog, and paced up and down with his pipe. When he came in again his mind was made up. He had never allowed himself to suffer when he could find relief, and such pain as this that he had borne lately was quite a new sensation to him. He would put an end to it: he would go away. Travelling was a sovereign remedy for many troubles of the mind, and he should come back a new man. He told his scheme to Mrs. Redgrave as they sat together over their dinner, not pretending to blink the cause.

‘I’m out of tune just now, and I want a few mouthfuls of foreign air to set me right again.. There’s something rather hum-drum about our life here, jolly as it is; and it’s not always easy to shake off vexatious thoughts, or to take a proper interest in the new steam plough, or the rebuilding of the great barn. I can see that Dick Stone and old Robin think me terribly fallen off, and are

by no means satisfied with me, and I must take some measures to regain my place in their good opinion.'

'I expect you're right,' said Mrs. Redgrave kindly, and rather glad of the opportunity of speaking her mind. 'I overheard old Robin the other day telling his son that he didn't believe the master took any account of the stock now, and that he wasn't half the man he used to be.'

'He's about right there,' said Stephen, laughing rather cynically. 'I've had rather a tough lesson to learn, and it's taken me some little time and trouble to learn it. But I mean to be my own man again, I can tell him; and to that end I shall pack my portmanteau and start off to-morrow for Paris.'

'To-morrow! that's rather short notice,' said Mrs. Redgrave, her mind reverting to shirts and socks.

'What's the good of waiting when you've made up your mind? It's late in the season now, and there's nothing special doing on the farm; I shall be back again long before

the hunting's over; and Dick will keep things together.'

His spirits had risen with the prospect of change and amusement, and he talked and laughed with much of his old light-heartedness; promising Lottie plenty of French bon-bons, and even proposing in sport to bring her home a French governess. Poor Lottie shook her head. She had tact enough to remember her mother's injunctions, and to hold her tongue; but she thought privately that she should never like any teacher after her dear Freda Chace; and she wondered whether Stephen was as sorry as she that Freda was not coming to live at Hawkstone after all. The next morning she and her mother came out into the gravel drive to see him off, and waved their handkerchiefs after him as he rattled along on his way to the Hamelford coach-office.

'Yes, old Robin was right enough,' reflected Mrs. Redgrave as she turned back into the house. 'For all he tries to put a good face on it, he isn't like the same man he used

to be. I never knew him give so many sharp answers in his whole life as he's given in the last three months. Well, I'm glad I didn't send her all those things upstairs as he wanted me to do. I'm much mistaken if she won't wear them in this house yet.'

Stephen looked about him as he always did when he drove through the Hamelford streets, half dreading, half desiring to catch a chance sight of Freda; but he saw, nothing in the least resembling the pale face which had first stirred his equable nature into vivid feeling, and in another hour or two he had left the town far behind him, and was well on his way, with a warm rug carefully disposed about his knees, a cigar between his lips, and the day's newspaper spread out before him.

Whatever his trouble might be, he carried little outward sign of it; and if the elderly clergyman who sat opposite to him admiringly eyeing his stalwart figure could have shifted his gaze to a girl who even

then sat crouching in a sea cave below Lion Point, and could have listened to their joint story, he would have found it hard to believe that the separation was her work rather than his. For it was a dark hour with Freda, one of those hours that now and again came upon her unawares, and found her with strength unequal to her need. It might be only some trifling incident, some sudden sharp recollection that let loose this imprisoned anguish, after she had faced heavier blows with an unmoved composure. But be that as it might, when the spring was touched she was fain to flee away like a wounded beast to her lair upon the shore, and to hide there in some deep shadow, while the bursting sobs seemed almost to rend her frame, and low moans broke unconsciously from her pale lips. And then, when the storm had spent itself, she would lean back against the cool green seaweed and gaze out over the ocean until peace came slowly back to her, and she could go home, shaken and exhausted indeed, yet so

calm outwardly that no human being was the wiser for what had passed awhile before on the lonely beach.

But to-day it had been a worse agony than usual, and it had lasted longer. It was passing now, and the quiet tears which were dropping on her lap brought relief with them. She knew well what had called it forth—a chance touch, a kindly word, that to any other would have seemed of no import—that even to her would have been as nothing, but for the magic power of old association. Her eyes ached, and her temples throbbed still; but she pressed her burning head against the damp rock wall beside her, and let both her mind and body rest. She might linger as long as she liked, for there was nothing to summon her away. The tide would not be up for a good three hours to come; and though the December morning was raw and chilly, she hardly needed the warm shawl she had wrapped around her, for the fever of her blood.

An hour ago her father had ridden off

across the moor to pick up Tom Horne and Ned Greig, and some other kindred spirits, all on their way to the Storleigh Steeplechases. He would not be back before midnight, so he had told her, with a rough kiss and a pat on the shoulder that was meant to be caressing; and Betty, deep in the mysteries of bacon-curing, was much too busy to inquire as to her whereabouts. For that morning no one wanted her, no one would miss her; and this certainty, which might once have been a trouble, was just then a blessed relief. She was not feeling sad now, only stunned and weak. It was almost pleasant to be so very still, to know that she need not lift hand or eyelid against her will, need not cast about in her mind to find some cheery answer that would fit her father's random talk, as she had striven to do this morning, when her throat had been dry and her chest heaving with suppressed agitation. She could almost have smiled now to think that one little sentence could have moved her so, only because it was an accidental

echo of words that she had heard once before, uttered in far different tones.

Well, it was no matter ; her strength was coming back, and by the time she climbed the cliff again she should be ready for the task to which she had pledged herself. She had not failed yet. She had no fear that she should fail now, for her resolve was firm as ever, even if her hopes oftentimes burned dim. So she lay and watched the brown and green anemones in a rock-pool close by, and the tiny shrimps darting hither and thither through the clear water or hiding amidst the feathery red seaweed that lined the shallow natural basin. Now and then a crab would come sidling along past her dim retreat, all unconscious of her noiseless presence, or a white-winged gull would sail slowly across the mouth of the cave and be lost to sight again.

Sometimes her gaze wandered idly to the sombre green rock studded with purple mussels and sharp-pointed limpets, to the broad deep stain of the high-water mark ; or higher yet,

to where the stone took hues of varied red and yellow, until it rose into a fantastic vaulted roof above her head. She drew in the salt sea smell, and let the salt sea wind blow over her bare head, and ruffle the wavy locks upon her forehead; and each fresh whiff did its part to soothe and brace her. When, at length, she came slowly out of her ocean cave, and looked around her before beginning to ascend the gorge, she was not like the same creature who had crept in there two hours before with compressed lips and a strange hunted look in her beautiful eyes.

There were dark circles round those eyes still, her always colourless cheeks were a shade whiter than their wont, and her step at first was not quite steady as she mounted from rock to rock or climbed up the rough stony track; but before she had reached the top she had regained her own elastic tread, and she was humming half unconsciously the refrain of some mournful ditty she had heard old Betty singing. Betty

saw her from the kitchen window, and beckoned her to come in and to admire the results of her long morning's work, as seen in the four great wooden pans before her.

'My back aches fit to split,' said she, dropping down into the nearest chair; 'but it's done, and that's a comfort. It's off my mind now.'

'Poor Betty!' said Freda pityingly. 'It was too bad of me to leave it all to you. I shall be ashamed to eat your bacon, good as it looks.'

'And who do you suppose I've done it for, if not for you? I'm none so fond of your father, Miss Freda, nor of those good-for-nothing friends of his, that I should spend my time in curing bacon for their eating. They'll know well enough how to make a flitch look foolish, I'll be bound; but they might whistle for one a long while before I'd be at the pains of salting it for them. It's you as I serves, Miss Freda.'

'I don't quite see that,' said Freda. 'Any

way, Betty, you must own that the pig was my father's, not mine.'

'And I take my wage from him, that's what your thinking, Miss Freda, though you don't say it out. True enough it is, but I wouldn't take another sixpence, or sleep another night in this desert place if it weren't on your account. So long as you stay I stay, but when you go I go too, bag and baggage, even though I shouldn't be able to find another roof to cover me.'

'You know I don't want you to stay against your will,' Freda rejoined. 'As you say, it's a dull life for you up on this far-away hill, after spending all your days in Hamelford. I don't want you to be shut up here for my sake an hour longer than you like. Only,' she added, speaking in that occasional tone of authority which Betty always recognised and respected, 'if you do stay in my father's house, you're bound to speak of him properly. And now let me peel the apples, for you must be tired out.'

Betty made a half-sulky protest, and there

was some muttering about trying other ways; but Freda, pretending not to hear, possessed herself of basket knife and basin, and sitting down opposite the old woman soon won her back into good-humour.

'To think,' said Betty presently, in rather lachrymose tones, as she watched the slender fingers at their work—'to think that you might have had Mr. Redgrave for your husband, and ridden in your carriage, and done wool-work all the days of your life, and now to see you paring apples here like any kitchen-maid.'

'And why shouldn't I?' said Freda, while a peculiar expression passed over her face. 'Paring apples isn't unpleasant, and I'm much more used to it than I ever was to wool-work.'

'Ay! you're deft enough at it. But I don't half like to see you when I think how things might have been. It's very odd why it should all have come about so.' And she sighed dolefully.

'Is it?' said Freda, with a sudden wan

smile. ‘It doesn’t seem so to me. But then I gave up thinking anything odd or strange some little time back. Come, Betty,’ she added in an altered key, and tossing the last apple back into the basin—‘whatever happens don’t let’s be lamentable, or begin to talk of what might have been. What earthly good can it do? We ought to keep up each other’s spirits when we are left alone together like this. Let me see. I haven’t half finished trimming up your Sunday bonnet, and this is a grand opportunity.’

It was a skilful diversion. Old Betty, despite her seventy years, was not proof against the charms of millinery, and took such a truly feminine delight in watching the progress of her head-gear towards completion, that she soon became far too intent on net quillings and ribbon bows to be tempted to any melancholy retrospect.

‘You won’t stay up,’ Freda said to her that same evening. ‘Tis past nine already, and I’ll let my father in. He’s sure not to be back much before midnight.’

'It's not fit for a young girl like you to be waiting up alone to such hours,' objected Betty.

'It's much less fit for an old lady like you to be waiting up to such hours,' returned Freda smiling. 'You know you would only be nodding in your chair, and most likely wouldn't hear his ring.'

Betty scouted the nodding, but she owned that her old bones were tired enough, and that she'd no special turn for sitting up at night.

'The time drags along so heavy-like when you've nothing to do,' she remarked, strangling a great yawn.

'Yes; but I have something to do,' Freda said. 'My wits get sharper towards the small hours, and I mean to try and puzzle out a tough bit of French that I could not master yesterday. See, there's my book and dictionary and a long candle and a blazing fire,—what can I want more?'

'Many an one at your age would be terrified to stay down here alone when all the rest

of the world are abed and asleep. Why, except old Josh up yonder in the stable-loft, there isn't a living soul within two miles of us.'

'Then there's the less reason for being frightened,' pronounced Freda; 'and I never was scared of darkness or bogies, thanks to Aunt Becky, who used to shut me up in the dark closet when I was naughty till I got quite used to it. Good-night, Betty. I prophesy that you'll be sound asleep before I've found out half-a-dozen hard words.'

The prophecy probably came true, for it was long before Freda could settle down to her reading. Her mind strayed erratically hither and thither, and the toils and journeys of Elizabeth amid the Siberian wilds failed to rivet her attention. And yet that well-worn tale had a powerful fascination for her long before Stephen had read it with her in an unfamiliar tongue. She turned to the fly leaf. There was her name in his handwriting, and the date of the day when he had brought it back for her from Stor-

leigh. She sighed heavily, and tried again to fix her mind upon the book, but in the Russian girl's history she seemed to read only what her own lot was meant to be. If it had not fallen to her share to wander over pathless snows, yet there were other foes to fight than cold and hunger, and it might be that she was set to save her father from a worse fate than a life-long exile. So she mused, her own thoughts mingling with the pages she was studying, and taking something of their colour. Yes, a drinking, gambling life was worse than any prison-house, and that was the life towards which her father was constantly tending, and into which he would but too surely have dropped ere now had not she been by to lure him back, to keep his languid conscience in some sort alive. If he ever refused another glass of brandy, it was because he remembered that his daughter would come to meet him at his own door, and that her eye was quick to note his looks. If he ever turned his back on the

jovial party at the ‘Green Dragon’ at Moriston, it was because he knew that Freda was sitting lonely at home. If he ever held back his hand from throwing the dice, or choked down the prompt ‘done with you’ trembling on his lips, it was because he reflected that if the luck should turn against him he might one day beggar not only himself but his child. And Freda understood all this. She read his variable impulses, his self-indulgence, his contrition, with the keen intuition which had come to her of late. She saw how in the first flush of new-gained wealth he had flung his money right and left with such a lavish hand that already his prodigality had begun to make havoc in his store. He was candid enough as to his affairs, and he soon told her, half jestingly, that he was beginning to outrun the constable.

‘The money burnt in my pocket, you see,’ he explained, as if it were an extenuation; ‘and then this place was so handy that I didn’t wait to look before I leapt.’

‘I suppose we might sell it,’ Freda had suggested.

'Sell it! not I. I'm not the man to be beaten; and besides, I should never get half of what I gave for it. It isn't the kind of place to hit most people's fancy, though it did mine. No, no, Freda, I know a trick worth two of that. Better make money than save it any day, say I. I hate pinching and paring, and always did. There's more to be made in a day by betting on the right horse, or playing a good hand at cribbage, than can be scraped together by a year's screwing.'

'And more to be lost if the right horse doesn't win after all, or if the high cards find their way into your neighbour's hand,' rejoined Freda, looking at him with a half smile across the broad back of the black and white alderney, one of his many recent purchases.

'Not by an old bird like me. I'm sure to make a hit sooner or later, and I'll take care to keep you high and dry, my girl.'

After this it was no surprise to Freda to find that he was for ever dabbling in horse-flesh, and was aware of every race and fair held within twenty miles, or to see him empty

out a pocketful of silver on to the table as the result of an evening at the 'Green Dragon.' Her influence did so far work with him that these evenings continued few and far between ; but against the horse traffic she was altogether powerless. The old passion had taken full hold of him again, and he had an absolute confidence in his good judgment and good fortune.

She found that it was worse than useless to remonstrate, and that her trust must lie in that concern for her which was never quite dormant even in his most reckless moments. She said so to herself this evening as she leant back in her low chair, book in hand, gazing absently at the burning logs in the grate piled high by Betty's careful hand before she went to bed. She must have sat thus very long, for they had burnt away to a glowing mass which presently fell in with a great crash, sending a shower of sparks down on the stone hearth beneath. She rose to put on fresh fuel, and just then the kitchen clock began to strike. She

counted the strokes up to twelve, and as the last died away she caught the distant click of a horse's hoof on the hard road. On it came at a round trot, and turned into the stable-yard. She took her candle, and going through the silent house to the back-door, undid the bolt and chain.

In spite of what he had said to her, she had not much expected to see her father back before the early morning. He was already off his horse, and leading it into its stall; and in a very few minutes he came across the yard towards the open doorway where she stood. He was quite sober; she could see that by his gait as he approached; but, when the light of the candle fell full on his face, she could tell too that there was a heavy cloud upon it.

'I heard you come in; but I'm afraid Josh didn't,' she said; 'he sleeps heavily, but I daresay we could wake him if you want anything.'

'No, it doesn't matter,' he made answer, not exactly sullenly but with more abruptness

than she had ever before perceived in his manner to her.

She took no notice of it, however, but led the way back through the chilly cold passage to the cheerful parlour.

'You'll find a good fire in here,' she said, as the ruddy light shone out through the half-open door as if to welcome him. 'Now let me make you comfortable after your long ride,' and she drew in the easy-chair to the hearth, and took his hat and coat from him.

Still he said nothing, though he submitted passively to her attentions. She waited a minute or two, and then asked whether he wanted food or wine.

He shook his head impatiently.

'Then shall I fill your pipe, or would you rather go to bed?'

'I don't care,' he returned shortly. Then, his voice changing suddenly to vehemence, he exclaimed—

'It doesn't matter a brass farthing what

I do. I've been a fool, and so you'll say, Freda, if you haven't said it long ago.'

'It would be very unreasonable to say it, only because the Mermaid has not won the steeplechase,' she answered quietly.

He looked up at her astonished.

'You know it then? Who's been here to tell you?'

'No one. Your own face told me directly you came in.'

'Did it tell you that I'd lost over a thousand pounds this blessed day?' he asked with a grim laugh.

'It told me that you were very much troubled. Father,' kneeling down beside him, and laying her hand on his, 'tell me all about it, just how it happened.'

It was not at all in her way to caress her father. Her feeling about him was not of the sort which finds its natural expression in loving endearments; and to counterfeit them would have been very hard to her nature. Nor was it needed that she should.

Paul Chace's sentiment, such as it was, rarely rose to the surface, and the chord would soon have jarred if touched too often. But to-night that little action of hers, which had sprung spontaneously out of a deep compassion he could in nowise understand, came like balm to his sore spirit, and opened the sluices of his trouble.

'She swerved at the second ditch—jade that she is! a place that she had taken a dozen times before. Nothing would get her over. Her temper was up, and the more Bob flogged her the less she'd move. And she's made me pay for her freak to the tune of eleven hundred pounds. I declare I could almost have killed her as she stood,' and his brow knitted again at the recollection.

'I'm *very* glad you didn't,' said Freda earnestly.

'Well, so am I now; but I was in a thundering rage, I can tell you. To see the beast standing there, refusing to budge an inch, was enough to try the patience of a saint.'

And I'm no saint either, as you've found out before this,' he added gloomily.

'Father, never mind the Mermaid and the eleven hundred pounds. It's a great deal for you to lose, I know; but we shall get on somehow, if only you will give up the horses. We need spend very little up here; and perhaps you could try your hand at farming. You used to make that pay when you were a young man, didn't you?'

'Ay; but my hand has lost its cunning. I'm no good for steady work nowadays, only for loafing about and doing a stroke of business here and there.'

'And yet you worked hard in Australia?'

'Only off and on; and besides there was something about the gold-finding that stirred up one's blood. It wasn't like pottering about these country fields from morning till night all the year round. I could never stand that. If your mother had been like you, Freda, I might have settled down to it twenty years ago; but it's too late now—I'm past mending;'

and he sighed in weary discontent with himself and his fate.

'No, don't say that,' she remonstrated eagerly: 'it is never too late. Don't you remember telling me how down-hearted you had been the very morning when you found your first nugget, and how you had thought it wasn't any good digging longer? But you *did* dig, and you came on the gold and got rich. Won't you try now, father, for my sake and your own, to make a fresh start? And if you can't do it here, let us go away. I am quite ready. I am not afraid of any sort of life.'

He looked at her earnestly for a moment, then sighed again more heavily than before.

'You're a good girl, Freda, if ever there was one; and I'd do a deal more for you than for any other living thing, but it's a harder matter than I thought to turn over a new leaf. I ought to ha' known that, and to have kept out of your way, instead of dragging you down with me. Well, I'll try

what I can do; but don't you build on my mending, for I've said as much before, and nothing has come of it. And don't you fret and worry yourself about me: I'm not worth it. I wish I were.'





C H A P T E R X I X.

'Love is not love that alters
When it alteration finds.'

I THOUGHT you were doing well up there; that the life suited you thoroughly.'

'It was well enough in its way, but I tired of it.'

'And you don't intend to go back.'

'No,' very deliberately, and then a long pause.

The speakers were Freda Chace and Mark Cameron. She was sitting close to the latticed window of the parlour to catch all she could of the waning daylight. He was standing by the centre table, apparently examining one of her father's fowling-pieces.

'I wonder, at any rate, that you came here; but perhaps you don't know how respectable people hold aloof from my father.'

'And isn't that a good reason why I should come? Like goes to like, they say; and respectable people have sometimes been apt to hold aloof from me.'

Her tone was cold, and his bitter. Neither looked at the other. Freda finished another round of the sock she was knitting before she spoke again.

'In the time when I happened to know more of you than I do now, you were keen, I think, to raise yourself in men's eyes; to shake off the reproach——' She stopped. She could not assail him on that side.

'Well!' he said, impatiently snapping the trigger of the gun-lock.

'It seems to me,' she said, altering the manner of her speech, 'that if you want to stand well with the world, you could not go to work in a worse way than by coming to this house.'

'But suppose I don't. Suppose I've left off caring a fig what men say or think about me. Suppose I mean to go my own way in spite of everybody.' He said all this with a fierce defiance, which reminded her of the scene under the oak at Hawkstone.

'Then,' she returned with a chilling unconcern, 'I've no more to say. It is your own affair, of course. But it was only fair to warn you.'

'Thank you,' he said; but she did not see the glance with which he said it. For another minute or two he trifled with the lock, then laying it down he crossed the room and seated himself in a chair opposite to hers.

'Look here,' he said abruptly. 'It's my own affair, as you say; but I should like to know whether you object to my staying about here. I don't say that it will alter my intention, because, as far as I can tell now, it won't; but I may just as well know.'

Of old he had often spoken to her roughly, but it had been a very different kind of roughness from this. Then it would perhaps have drawn tears; now it stung her into hot anger.

'Since you speak so plainly, so will I. I don't object to your staying here. Why should I? We are old acquaintances. But I may wonder at it all the same; and I may think that it would be better for you to be a hundred miles off.'

He sat pondering, his eyes fixed upon the grey worsted ball in her lap.

'I did not come without invitation,' he said presently, as if answering an unspoken accusation. 'When I met your father the other day in Hamelford, he reminded me that he had been an old friend of my father's, and he told me he had often wished to see me. If he and I do spend some time together on sea or on land, it won't greatly interfere with you, will it?'

'No.' A dubious uncertain 'No.'

'I may not be good for much, but I don't suppose I shall lead him into mischief. Is that what you are afraid of?'

'I'm afraid of nothing,' she retorted, her eyes flashing up at him. 'It is not worth so much discussion. Stay or go as suits you best.'

Mark rose, and walking to the fire threw on a fresh log and stood for some time with his back to her. Then turning round he took the fowling-piece from the table.

'Just now it suits me best to see how far this gun will carry,' he said tersely, as he left the room. 'I'll think about the staying or going later on.'

Left alone, Freda dropped her knitting-needles, and, letting her hands lie idly in her lap, sat gazing fixedly through the open window at the two clipped yews.

'I managed badly,' she muttered to herself. 'I should have kept my temper. I should have said what I meant to say. But it doesn't much matter after all. He knows what my father is. He knows that if I had my choice he should go. If he doesn't mean to go, I cannot make him.' She drew a long weary sigh. 'I thought I was prepared for everything, but I never dreamt of this. I think if I had,'—she stopped as she caught sight of Mark crossing the courtyard towards the outer gate. He did not

look towards her, but she could see his face plainly enough. The haggard expression that it had worn in the summer was stamped on it yet more deeply now; but the outward change was as nothing to that within, and she wondered as she watched him whether it could indeed be possible that they two had once been little friends and that she had lisped out all her baby griefs into his pitying ears. Those times seemed, indeed, to belong to some other world. But it was the present not the past that claimed her now. She had heard talk that morning of sport with the gulls over at Bernard's Peril, and sea-fishing round the point. She had seen her father's eyes light up, as they had a trick of doing, at the prospect of any fresh amusement; and she had seen, too, a certain determined look about Mark's lips when he told her just now that she would not change his purpose; a look which she knew full well of old. It might, she foresaw, need stronger hands than hers to loosen the bond formed in the last three days.

Could it really be only three days since her father had marched triumphantly into her parlour late one afternoon, when the sea-fog was beginning to draw a grey curtain before the windows, and in his loudest heartiest key had heralded a guest?

'Who do you think I've brought here, Freda? Why, your friend Mark Cameron himself. Stumbled upon him five minutes after I set foot in Hamelford. Should have known him anywhere by the likeness, even if he hadn't come up and spoken to me, like the good fellow that he is.'

'I did not know you were coming back again,' Freda had said in an unmoved voice as she took the hand. Mark held out to her. 'But you are apt to turn up unexpectedly, it seems.'

'Yes,' he answered, after a hardly perceptible pause; and then in a harsh, careless tone, 'I'm here to-day, gone to-morrow. I came up from Bristol. I happened to have some time to spare.'

'And he is going to spend it here,' struck

in Paul. ‘I nailed him at once, and would not take a “No” when he tried at it. Why, there’s my girl at home, says I. I knew you when she was but a chit. She’ll be main glad to see you, I’ll warrant. She was talking about you not long ago.’

‘I hope Mark does not expect civil speeches,’ Freda had responded, looking at him steadily; ‘for I’m not clever at making them. I can do something better, though. You must both want some supper after your walk, and I’ll go and see about it.’

This was how, after so many chances and changes, these two had met again only three days ago! They had exchanged few words alone together until this afternoon, when Mark had chosen to linger in the parlour and turn the talk on his Scotch life. Freda made no effort to escape him, for she too had something to say that had been upon her lips from the hour when he first set foot within those doors. And now it had been said in part, and had been of no avail. She took up her needles again and tried to go on

knitting, but the lazy dreamy work irked her beyond endurance, and thrusting it into the table-drawer beside her she rose hastily. She craved for some violent bodily exertion; and in another minute she was making her way with impetuous haste towards the gorge. Her father and Mark were, as she knew, up on the moor, and she had no fear of meeting them.

It was a damp dull day in February. There had been a drizzling rain falling all through the morning, and a white haze still shrouded the distant cliffs and the long straight line of the horizon. The path by which she descended was wet and slippery at first from the slow drippings of the evergreens through which it wound ; and when she reached the rocks, and began to scramble over them, she found them chill and clammy to her touch. The tide was coming up, and there was barely time for her to get round the headland and into the sandy bay beyond, but she knew of some rough natural steps by which she could regain the cliff, and

for these she meant to make. She would have a race for it, but such a race exactly suited her just then. The spice of danger nerved and excited her, and was strangely enticing.

On she went, springing over the pools left by the sea-water, balancing herself on a sharp ledge of rock, stepping cautiously over the treacherous beds of green sea-weed, or running lightly across a strip of yellow gleaming sand washed just before by the advancing waves. She was not a moment too soon. The white foam was bubbling about her feet, and the lowest of the rock steps was almost hidden before she reached them. Her boots were heavy with water, and she was breathless with running, and could not get on fast.

For one brief instant the thought crossed her that she should not be in time, that those oncoming billows would catch her, and suck her back into the hungry ocean; and if it should so happen, it would soon be over—her pain, her fear, her struggle—over

for ever. But no! her time had not yet come. She gained the steps, she clambered up, and, dropping down on a projecting crag, fell to watching the glassy waves, as one by one they rolled on and curling over broke in silver spray upon the great stones below her.

The little pools across which she had stepped were wide enough now to float a fishing-boat. Big rocks, that might have served as shelter against the driving showers a few hours back, showed only their green sea-weed-crowned heads. Then these too had disappeared, and the pools had all run together, and there was one wide sheet of water. It was a scene of which she never wearied; and even now, as she gazed, it held her fascinated. The exercise had quickened her pulses and tinted her cheeks. Her eyes lost their heaviness, and for a brief space she felt—almost happy.

Then a wound never long quiet throbbed suddenly, and starting up she pressed forward to the top of the cliff, not halting once

again. Twilight had set in when she reached home. Her father and Mark had already returned, and through the uncurtained window of the parlour she caught a momentary glimpse of their two figures seated before the bright wood-fire. Cheery as the room looked, she would sooner have lingered out in the cold night air than have gone in just then. They had seen her, however, and her father beckoned to her. They both looked up as she entered, and Paul pulled in her own special chair between himself and the fire.

'I was just telling this fellow,' he said, as she sat down, 'that I could have picked him out among a thousand, for he's as like his father as he can stare; but how he should have known me beats me hollow.'

'That's soon told,' said Mark. 'The old bell-man showed you to me.'

'What! as a curiosity?' said Paul, chuckling. 'I didn't know I was so well worth looking at as all that comes to.'

Mark was silent for a minute, and then rejoined as curtly as before, 'No, not exactly

as a curiosity—I asked him. I'd a fancy for seeing my father's old friend, all the more, perhaps, because some other folks seem minded to give him a wide berth.'

'Ay, you found that out, did you?' said Paul moodily. 'So they do, but it don't trouble me much. I've done nothing since I came home to set their tongues wagging, and they are not all such saints over there in Hamelford that they need shake their heads at old Paul. What cock-and-bull stories might they have told you about me?'

'They told me,' said Mark, looking straight into the fire and speaking slowly as if meditating, 'that you were rather a queer character, and kept queerish company. They said you had pretty nigh run through all the money you brought home, and that you would never be satisfied till you had brought yourself, and your daughter too, to poverty and want.'

'And if he does!—if all that they dare to say is true,' broke forth Freda, altogether forgetful of her father's presence, forgetful of everything except the sharp sting of Mark's

words; 'if we do come to want, it is his concern and mine, no one else's. Can't we be left alone out here where we trouble nobody, where we want nobody to spy upon us?'

'Whew, little daughter!' exclaimed Paul, with a look of some amazement. 'What's put your dander up? It's true enough,' he added, with something like a sigh. 'You know it as well as I do, Freda. I haven't quite forgotten that night, not so very long ago, when I promised you to try and mend my ways. And I did mean to try; but when a man's going full tilt downhill, it ain't so easy to pull himself up short. It's easier far to go on to the bottom.'

Neither of his auditors made any reply. Mark's eyes were fixed intently on a leaping jet of flame, and his hands were tightly interlaced round his knee. Freda had leant back in the shadow, and was looking at her father.

'There was one other thing I remember,' Mark proceeded presently, in the same quiet voice, 'that it was more than guessed you were part owner with a certain Ned

Gleig of a fast-sailing smack,—a smack that don't always carry fish.'

He lifted his eyes suddenly, and looked first at Freda, then at Paul.

Freda knew how to understand that look. Significant as it was, she could not fail to comprehend its language. Her own glance turned again towards her father. It would have been easy to see that he was discomposed, even if he had not pushed back his chair and risen hastily with a muttered oath.

'Let them mind their own business, and leave me to mind mine, or I shall fall foul of some of them. It must be pretty nigh supper-time, I'm thinking, and I have not had my pipe yet.'

'Is that true?' asked Freda in a low tone, when he had swung out of the room, and the echo of his steps had died away in the passage.

'Is what true?'

'That about the smack—the smuggling,' she returned impatiently.

'You ought to be able to tell me rather than I you,' he said.

'If I knew, I should certainly *not* tell you. But is it true that you heard it—that the people you chose to gossip with said such things?'

'Oh, yes, that's true. It would not be worth while, you see, to lie about such a trifle as that,' he made answer, with something like a sneer.

'I did not mean that you had lied;' and though she spoke coldly, there was a kind of apology in her tone. 'I don't suppose you would do that.'

'No? We never know what we may come to. But, at any rate, I spoke truth as to the smack, and I spoke truth this afternoon when I told you I might stay about here for sometime. I'm going shares in a tidy yawl that puts into Linford.'

There was a moment's silence, then Freda said—

'You have not taken long in making up your mind.'

'No. One place is as good as another, and one life is as good as another. I settled it an hour ago.'

'Why did you leave Greenock?' Freda asked suddenly. 'You meant to do well there. What made you come away? Of course you need not tell me unless you please; it's no concern of mine.'

He laughed. 'I've not the least objection to telling you. I did not do well. I did badly. I failed in what I meant to do, and so—I came away.'

She looked at him attentively.

'I'm not deceiving you,' he went on harshly. 'I don't say how I failed, or why. I leave you to guess that. But it doesn't very much signify: it will be all the same a hundred years hence.'

She thought within herself that she *could* guess at his unuttered meaning, and at something yet beyond. The effect of his failure was shown in every word he spoke, in every glance he gave. The inherited nature *had* been in him, after all; and the early promise of his

youth had faded away before the blast of misfortune, or been cankered by the gnawings of despair. How entirely that promise must have faded, if her father and his boon companions were fit mates for him now!

That night, long after she was shut into her own room, long after Paul was snoring soundly on his pillow, Mark was still abroad, pacing to and fro on the edge of the cliff with the restless monotony of a caged animal. He had no idea how often he had trodden and retrodden the same ground ; he had no sensation of cold or wet, though the wintry air was keen on those exposed heights and the rain had set in again. He had no consciousness of time.

'It is the only way,' he was saying inwardly with passionate emphasis. 'The only way to guard her, to guide him. I must let her think me a brute if she will. I am a brute, I believe, sometimes. She hates me! and no wonder. I don't know what I'm saying or doing when I speak to

her. But I shall learn. I shall do better in time if I don't first go mad with the pain. And I can't afford to go mad as long as I'm wanted, as long as there is any chance of my doing anything for her. How could he bring her to a place like this—among men like these? She with not another friend in the world to stand by her and protect her. It isn't much I can do yet awhile. She won't give me a chance. She knows too well what I wanted. I thought somehow it would have been easier. I thought she might have said some kindly words when we met again. But there was not one. I can guess how it is. That villain turned her head with his riches and his flattery, and taught her to look down on me. I saw it plainly enough in his face that day—curse him—for all his smooth speaking. And yet I wish I'd kept a civil tongue in my head too, when I was talking to him. It might have served me now. She fancies I'm going to the bad, and I verily believe I should if

I'd only myself to care for. Was I cheating her to-day when I let her think it was just my freak to hang on here, leading an idle life with her father and his friends? There's no help for it if I was. She must never know that it's for her sake I've thrown up all my prospects—not even if some day—Jacob served fourteen years for Rachel, and then he won her; but I suppose Rachel loved him, and not some other man. While she—she loves this Redgrave still. How her face changed to-day when her father chanced to speak his name! He did not see it, but I did. She would have the fellow to-morrow if he asked her, though he has thrown her over, scoundrel that he is.'

A scud of rain beat down on his bare head, and the rising wind whistled dismally over the open moorland, but he neither felt nor heard. His whole being was absorbed by the wrathful jealousy and lofty self-devotion that were warring together within his breast. He set his teeth and drew in his breath

hard. Could he bear it even for a few days? Could he bear it for many months? Ay, in spite of his torment of spirit there was no wavering of heart. For her sake he would bear anything, even if he were never to win so much as one gentle word in payment for his suffering.





C H A P T E R X X.

'The dreadful soul of woman, who one day
Forgets the old and takes the new to heart,
Forgets what man remembers, and therewith—
Forgets the man.'

ONLY a fortnight before, Mark, coming back from a trip to the Orkneys, had found waiting for him at his Greenock lodgings an ill-spelt ill-written letter bearing the Hamelford post-mark. He had opened it with a startled wonder that anyone there should have cared to write, or should have known where to find him. It was in no hand that he knew, but, looking at the signature, he found that it came from old Betty Carter. Then he turned back to the beginning, and read the few

straggling lines she had laboriously penned. She gave no reason for sending them. She simply told him that Miss Freda's father had come home alive after all; that neither Mr. Redgrave nor her aunt would have aught more to do with her, and that she and her father, who was none too steady, were living together in a lonely house on the moor seven miles from Hamelford. At the bottom of the page she had added, as though it were an after-thought, 'Miss Freda does not no as ow I ave riten.'

When Mark had read through that short epistle, and had taken in its tidings, he had one clear resolve in his mind—to get back at once to Hamelford, and learn there all that was to be learnt. He went that same day to his captain, got a release from his engagement as mate to the 'Fairy Queen,' and turned his back on Greenock at sunrise the next morning, travelling southwards by land that so he might save time. He had a little money in his pocket, enough to pay his journey and to keep him for a few weeks.

Beyond that he did not look. He must leave the future until he found himself in Hamelford, and knew for certain how matters stood with Freda. Once there he did very soon know, for there were plenty of people in the town ready on the first hint to descant on Paul's misdoings, and to bemoan Freda's folly.

'Not that she could well help herself,' croned out the old dame who had kept school near the quay when Mark was a little lad, and had taught him to spell. 'They say her aunt turned her out as soon as her father showed his face here; and yon gentleman up at Hawkstone was all for getting quit of her too. It's a sad pity, for she's a likely maid; and if all tales be true, Paul Chace's house is none the best home for her.'

This was the story, but slightly varied, which Mark heard again and again during the two first days he spent in Hamelford. He had meant, if needful, to go to the school-house and question Miss Morton her-

self, but now he abandoned this intention, and another, which had sometimes entered his mind during his journey, began to strengthen there. He would see Freda. He would judge for himself how the land lay. And if it should prove that he might serve or protect her by staying near at hand, then he would stay even if he had to break stones upon the road. Events shaped themselves to further his end. He easily discovered the way by which Paul Chace usually came into Hamelford, and he spent a good part of two mornings strolling up and down the lane, and looking for the square-built figure and grizzled curls which he already seemed to know by description. When at last he saw Paul, he hardly needed to ask the old bellman passing by who yon man might be.

‘Eh!’ said the old fellow, looking over his shoulder to survey the approaching traveller mounted on a stout brown cob. ‘Yon’s Paul Chace, and a rum chap he is; been out in them foreign parts more nor twenty year, and let everyone set him down for dead.

They say he's got a big place out beyond Moriston fit for a workhouse.'

This last bit of information was lost upon Mark; for he had stepped up to Paul, who drew rein and looked hard at him. Before he could speak, however, Mark had said—

'You don't know me, but perhaps you'll remember my name. I'm Mark Cameron. I think you knew my father well.'

'Mark Cameron!' the other exclaimed, slapping his own knee, and then holding out his hand with the utmost heartiness.

'Remember your name! I should think so. Why, I thought it was Robert himself come out of his grave, looking just for all the world as he used to look in the old days at Althorpe. I'm mightily glad to see you, my lad,' and swinging himself off his horse he had clapped his hand on Mark's shoulder as if they were the oldest of friends; and presently, turning him back towards the town, began to rattle out questions and exclamations with a surprising volubility. He never did things by halves, and before many

minutes had passed he had proposed Mark's returning with him to Lion Point that very afternoon. Mark, taken by surprise, had hesitated, but only for a moment. This man was Freda's father, and through him lay the best chance of helping her, if help of any sort she needed. And at least he should meet her—he should look once again on her beloved face. And, besides all this, he was moved, as Freda had been before him, by the touch of genuine kindly feeling amid all there might be of evil in Paul's nature. It seemed as if, through those many years and the strange changes of his life, the memory of his early comrade had been cherished with a rare constancy, making him ready at once to greet the son with open arms. It was seldom, indeed, that Mark spoke of his father, but he found himself doing it that day as they were returning along the coast-road, Paul keeping his horse at a foot's pace beside him.

'It is new to me,' he said, 'to find any one liking him and praising him. I've never

had much chance of feeling proud of him ; I've never heard a good word said of him except by my grandmother.'

'Then you may just tell anyone who says a bad word of him, that I, Paul Chace, will back him for the truest friend and the finest fellow that has walked the earth for many a day ; and a fig for anyone who says he wasn't.'

There was a passing doubt in Mark's mind whether Paul's opinion on that or any other subject would carry entire conviction with it. Perhaps Paul himself shared it, for he added,—

'I'm nothing to brag of myself, but I know a good fellow when I see him ; and if you've only half the stuff in you your father had, my lad, you're worth your weight in gold. People may talk as they please about his getting a bit fresh now and then, or being keen for a lark ; but I say, and what I say I'm ready to stick to, that there isn't one among your steady-going old dunderheads between here and Exeter fit to hold a rushlight to him.'

Paul spoke with so much energy that Mark looked at him in surprise. Could he remember how darkly Robert Cameron's life had ended?

'You were at home when he died. You know all that happened just before?' he asked in a low voice.

'Yes,' said Paul hastily, 'I know. Don't let's talk about that; I hate to think of it. I never do, if I can help it. Look there, away to your right on the top of that high cliff yonder; you can get a sight of Lion Point now.'

Mark looked, and as his eyes discerned the grey building showing dimly through the misty air, all memory of his father faded out of his mind. In half an hour more he would be face to face with her. His heart leapt up, and yet he knew too well that its sick hunger would not even then be satisfied,—that it would be but as a crumb of bread to a starving man. Deep in his recollection lived those words and glances of hers by the Razor Stone in the avenue at Hawkstone, and he needed not to be told that the old frank

affection had been swept away by a torrent of stronger emotions. And yet she might be a little glad to see him. She would surely have some sort of welcome—perhaps one of the old smiles—for her ancient friend, now that the gentleman lover had proved false, and he had returned to her again.

So had his thoughts run as he climbed the steep hill, replying mechanically to Paul's talk about the land and cattle. And then they had reached the house, and they had gone in to her, as she sat at work with the fire-light playing upon her hair and cheek and on her dark woollen dress, and she had risen up to meet him ; and even in the surprise of that first moment there had been no smile, no welcome, no trace of kindness in eye or voice or touch. And he too had managed to carry himself as if she were less than nothing to him ; and he had found his way presently to the kitchen to look for old Betty, and had stood leaning against the dresser with a calm, set face, while she broiled her steak, and told him in a cautious undertone that

she had felt sure he would like to hear of old friends.

'And as good luck would have it,' went on the old woman garrulously, 'I'd got by me a bit of paper with your address written out full upon it. It was a cover that your grandmother had directed to you; and by chance it got smeared, and so she took another. I happened to be there at the time, and I picked the spoilt one up to wind a bit of wool on. And then not long ago, when I used up the wool, there was the address staring me in the face, and seeming to tell me as plain as plain could be to write to you. So I sat down a day or two after and wrote, and I won't say but what I'd a hope we might see you here before long.'

'Yes, I came away at once,' said Mark quietly, 'and I think maybe I shall stay, now I'm come, somewhere hereabouts. Paul Chace seems to take kindly to me, and I can but try the old fishing life again.'

Betty looked at him, hesitating whether to tell him what was just then in her mind,

namely, that the best thing he could do would be to marry Freda as soon as ever he could, and carry her off to Scotland or anywhere else out of her father's way. But something in Mark's face warned her that she had better be silent on that head, and she only said entreatingly,—

‘Whatever you do, Mark, don't you let out that I brought you here. It would be as much as my place is worth if Miss Freda ever guessed it. It seems to me she's a deal prouder now than she used to be before this vagabond father of hers turned up to bring disgrace on her.’

‘You may make your mind easy,’ Mark had rejoined. ‘I shall tell her nothing.’

And as the days slipped by, it seemed indeed as if he were likely to keep his word. After that one talk in which he had announced to her his determination to remain, he never tried to speak to her privately. He took a lodging in a cottage down at Linford Beach, and spent his time either in his fishing-boat or in Paul's company on land,

rarely coming to Lion Point, and when he came making no long stay. He generally contrived to meet Paul out of doors, and would either inveigle him into his yawl for a day's fishing, or join him in a trip to Hamelford or Moriston; for he already stood high in Paul's favour, and was gaining by degrees a curious influence over him. No one knew, for Paul himself did not guess, and Mark never told how often the elder man was held back from some act of wanton folly by the watchful care of his young comrade; and this too at the very time when the country people were shaking their sage heads, and recalling, not without satisfaction, their ancient prophecies that Mark Cameron would come to no good.

'Was he not forever to be found with Paul Chace and his lot on the skittle-ground, or at the bar of the "Three Crowns" or the "Green Dragon"? Fishing, indeed! 'twas mighty little fishing, or work of any kind, that he ever put his hand to.'

To say truth, Paul's own friends would

have been quite ready to dispense with his society, and regarded him, though on different grounds, with eyes hardly more favourable than those of the respectable inhabitants of Hamelford. They were by no means inclined to echo Paul's verdict that he was a rare good fellow, voting him, on the contrary, a cross-grained chap, who was apt to spoil sport, and arguing that it was sheer perversity that made the old man cotton to him. What if he were, as Paul declared, a first-rate shot and oar? yet he never drained his tankard like a man, or joined in the loud betting over the cards. There was no knowing what to make of him with that glum face of his. But Paul never found him glum when they two together turned their backs on the noisy crew, and went home in the twilight or the midnight darkness across the moor. At such times Mark would rouse himself to talk and laugh, drawing his companion into telling of the adventures of his earlier days; or, if the chance offered, advising with him

as to some doubtful bargain or ticklish negotiation so prudently, that Paul would tell him approvingly that he'd got an old head on young shoulders, and would now and then, though not very often, follow his counsels.

Paul's mind was much exercised just now by his money affairs, and by various increasing perplexities appertaining thereto. It was becoming rather exasperating to have Ned Gleig throwing out constant hints that he would like to see something of a certain £300 which he had won sometime back by a racing bet, while the hoard which Paul had brought home seemed to be melting away like a snowball in his hands, and it was not easy to say whence more should come when it should all be gone. Now and then he made a lucky venture, which proclaimed itself loudly by his uproarious spirits, but, as he was well aware in his cooler moments, these chance windfalls would not long serve to keep the wolf from the door. Yet he clung with a bull-dog tenacity to his present home and mode of life, rejecting

scornfully or angrily, as his mood might be, all Freda's suggestions of change, and affirming vehemently that it would all come right—as right as a bag o' nails. Perhaps it was this preoccupation of his in his own affairs, perhaps only his natural heedlessness, but whatever the cause, it so fell out that Mark had been a good many weeks at Linford before Paul began vaguely to perceive two things: firstly, that Mark and Freda were not at all the fast friends he had supposed them to be; and secondly, that Freda herself was less patient and gentle than at first. His conscience told him that he tried her sorely and often, and that he had only himself to blame if her long-suffering had found its limits; but the ugly fact still remained that he had seen flashes of anger in her eyes, and had caught a sharp ring in her voice, which were too like faint echoes of the looks and tones he remembered in her mother, even though the quick compunction which always followed them, the wistful anxiety to atone, were very unlike that mother.

'Come in and sup with us,' Paul had said to Mark one bleak March evening, as they halted at the arched gateway on their return from Moriston. 'It must be a good month since you've broken bread in my house.' And Mark, after a moment's hesitation, had agreed. In the parlour they found Freda lying back in the arm-chair, with her eyes shut and a book open in her lap. She roused herself instantly, however, and, sitting straight up, began to ask about their doings in a hurried absent way.

'Oh! we've had a pretty fair day,' said Paul carelessly. 'Have you been falling asleep over the fire?'

'I suppose so,' she returned quickly. 'I meant to read, but it got dark, and I was too lazy to light the candle.'

'Well, I must just go out and see how Brown Nell is this evening,' observed Paul—'I told Josh to give her a warm mash—and then we'll have supper, and a game of cards to follow. I shan't be long; so I'll tell Becky to get the meat ready.' And he went

out, leaving Mark and Freda together. She did not attempt to speak again, but kept very still, looking fixedly into the red embers. The fire had burned low, and he could only dimly see her face as she sat opposite him. It was not sad, but something in its expression touched him to the heart, and a sudden impulse urged him to address her in a more friendly strain than was his wont in these days.

'We had a long tramp this afternoon, your father and I. We must have gone within a mile or two of Storleigh; but he has sold the colt, so our time wasn't wasted.'

'I'm glad,' she said, 'but how can you spare time from your fishing for that sort of business?'

'Oh! my mate managed to do without me,' he said, cheered by even this slight show of interest. 'I'm not much of a judge of horseflesh, but two heads are better than one.'

She did not reply, and there was another pause till he spoke again.

'We came back by Hamelford beach, past the old cottage. I had not been so near it for a long time. The people living there take good care of it, and keep the jessamine properly trained. Do you remember how much store my grandmother set by that jessamine?' His heart beat as he spoke, and he watched her anxiously.

'Yes,' she said softly, 'quite well. She was very fond of all flowers. How carefully she used to water the mignonette in the corner by the Linn!'

'Didn't she?' he returned, emboldened to go on by her manner, urged by his own yearnings. 'Those were pleasant days when she was alive, when we were children together, and used to play about the woods.'

'I suppose they were,' she answered slowly, and her cold tone seemed to chill him through and through; 'at least we thought them so, because we were young and foolish; but we should not care to have them back again, and I don't find any pleasure in remembering them.'

This time it was Mark's turn to be silent, and not another word passed between them till Paul re-entered to announce that supper was ready in the adjoining room.

'I won't come in,' said Freda wearily. 'I'm very tired, and my head aches; and you won't be alone, father. I'll go upstairs to bed.'

'To bed!' exclaimed her father in astonishment. 'What! at six o'clock, and without any supper. Starving won't cure a headache. Come in here and try what Becky's good pie will do for you.'

So, rather than contest the point, she went in and tried to eat some pie, and even to talk a little, but it was a poor attempt; and as soon as they got back into the parlour she returned to her arm-chair, and taking up her book hardly opened her lips or lifted her head again.

The two others sat down to cribbage, but Mark went away early, resisting all his host's solicitations to stay for one more pipe. The door had hardly closed behind him when

Paul turned round on his daughter, and taxed her sharply with her sullenness and incivility.

'If he were a dumb beast you would not have treated him so. You've a deal more to say to the Newfoundland in the yard yonder than you have to him. I see now why he won't come up here. No wonder, indeed, if you're going to sit mum like a stock or a stone all the time he's in the house.'

He had never spoken so angrily to her, and she looked back at him with a like indignation kindling in her own face.

'You should have let me go up-stairs; I told you that I wasn't well. It was your own fault that I stayed.'

'And pray, why shouldn't you stay? The headache's all gammon, and you know that as well as I do. You can talk to chaps like Gleig and Burney, it seems, and you can't throw a word at Mark Cameron, whom you've known all your life. Have you quarrelled with him?'

He put the question shortly, and she answered it as shortly.

'No; I have not.'

'Then I've no patience with such whims. I'll tell you what, Freda; if anyone could get me out of the mess I've got myself into I believe it would be Mark Cameron, and yet you're doing your best to set him against us both.'

She looked at him with sudden keen attention.

'I don't think I quite understand you,' she said; 'how can Mark get you out of any mess?'

'I don't say that he can. I may be too deep in even for him to pull me out; and there are some things he don't know about, and that I don't mean him to know; but, as I said before, if anyone could help me he would do it; for he's a shrewd fellow, and doesn't mind his trouble. He'll stand my friend through thick and thin, unless you manage to put up his back by your surly ways.'

'What is it you want me to do?' she asked. There was a troubled look in

her eyes, but the anger had died out of them.

'To do! Why, just to be cheery and sociable with him, to be sure. You can, if you like. You've a pleasant way enough with you, and he's a deal better worth pleasing, I'll take my oath, than yon chap over at Hawkstone ever could have been, for all you—'

'Don't!' she entreated, in a tone that was almost like a cry.

It was the first time her father had spoken so broadly of her former love, and the words had slipped out in his heat. He was sorry instantly when he saw her keen distress.

'There, there, Freda!' he said, catching her hands, and his tone changing to one of kindly concern. 'We've both been in a passion, and that was a nasty thing I said. I'm sorry for it, my girl. I can't say more than that, can I? Give me a kiss and let's make it up.'

Her eyes dropped for an instant; then, sud-

denly lifting them to his face, she kissed him gravely, and, still standing in front of him, she said quietly—

'I will do what you wish, father. If I have been rude to Mark, I will not be so again.'

'Never mind, don't let's say any more about it,' rejoined Paul, his conscience still pricking him at the recollection of that speech about Stephen. 'We don't very often fall out, do we? And you're a better daughter than I deserve.'

The next time, however, that Paul happened to be alone with Mark, he could not resist saying—

'I rated my Freda the other night for being so crusty to you, Mark. It was some girl's nonsense, I suppose; but it didn't mean anything, and she promised it should not happen again. Come in some day soon.'

But Mark's brows drew together, and he made no promise. He was to hear of this same rating from Freda herself. One day, when he and Paul came back from coursing at Moriston, they found her lingering by the

garden wall, as if she had been watching for them. Her father was in haste to take his greyhounds round to the yard, and Mark too was departing when she begged him to wait one minute.

'I wanted to speak to you,' she said, looking straight before her, and bringing out her words as if they were a lesson learnt by rote. 'My father says I've been uncivil to you lately. I did not know that. I did not intend it, and I am very sorry. I hope you will come here as often as you like. He is glad to see you, and I think it may help to keep him at home. I will try not to spoil your visits.'

The words were humble, but there was nothing humble in the tone—in the rigid weary face. Mark did not answer instantly, but after a minute he said with some hoarseness in his voice—

'Yes, I will come; but you need not trouble yourself to practise politeness. It makes no difference to me, and I'll manage to do without it.'

She looked up at him, began to speak, and

then stopped. What she had to say came out at last with an effort—

‘I am afraid that won’t do. We could not go on so—and why should we? There is nothing, I suppose, to hinder our being pleasant to each other when we are together. I daresay the fault has been mine; but my father says you are a good friend to him: I am grateful to you for that. Shall we be good friends too?’

‘If you please.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Freda with a certain hesitation, ‘you might be able sometimes to show me how I could be more useful to him. You see more of his life and of his friends than I do. I don’t want to ask about their doings—your doings; but, perhaps, now and then you might be able to say a word that would guide me while we stay here. I hope it will not be for long,’ she added with feverish impatience. ‘I do hope it will not be long before we get away from this place.’

‘I hope so too, for your sake,’ Mark returned very quietly. Presently he said—‘I

did speak such a word once, and it did not please you. It was about that smack of Ned Gleig's. I thought you ought to know, and I didn't care to tell you behind your father's back.'

'That smack of Ned Gleig's,' she repeated. Then, as the recollection came back—'I had forgotten altogether. Could I have done anything ?'

'Perhaps not. It does not matter now, at any rate ; your father's clear of that business.'

'How came I to forget it ?' Freda said hurriedly ; and just then Paul himself returned, and Mark, bidding them an abrupt farewell, went on his way to Linford.

But Freda, as she walked slowly beside her father towards the house, owned within herself that she had done her old companion grievous wrong when she had thought that Ned Gleig and he could ever be congenial spirits.



C H A P T E R X X I.

'That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me ;
To him my tale I teach.'

PAUL and Mark were smoking together at midnight over the kitchen fire at Lion Point. Mark had kept his word, and often came there now. And Freda too had tried to keep to her part of the bargain. It was manifest that she wished to make him welcome, but to him it was not less manifest that her welcome was a forced one. They had been playing backgammon that night, and had been talking of the old ghost stories that hung about the Manor House at Moriston. Since Freda had gone to bed, however, the two men had not

spoken much, but had sat on either side the hearth puffing steadily. Paul was the first to break the silence that had fallen on them.

'What did Jacob Forbes mean to-day when he talked of your being born with a halter round your neck?'

'He meant that he was angry. I'd rubbed him up a bit about the cock-fighting.'

'Ay, I know so much, but that was a poor reason for such talk. I wondered you took it so quiet. I should have kicked the fellow in my young days, or in my old ones either for that matter.'

'I made up my mind to swallow a good deal when I came back here,' Mark said calmly. 'It's nothing new for me to have my father cast in my teeth.'

'It was *that* he meant, was it?'

'To be sure. Why, when I was a lad they were always flinging it at me that he'd have been transported beyond seas if he hadn't died when he did.'

'He wouldn't then,' returned Paul sharply,

staring straight across at Mark. ‘So they happen to be just wrong.’

Mark stared back at him. Paul had a way of ignoring his father’s offence which puzzled him.

‘I fancy now and then,’ he said, ‘from the way you talk about my father, that you can’t have known exactly what happened at Althorpe.’

Paul laughed grimly.

‘Didn’t I ! I don’t know who should have known if I didn’t. But just tell me one thing, lad. Do you suppose—you yourself I mean—that it *was* your father struck that blow, and that it was a just sentence the judge passed on him that day in court?’

‘How can I help it?’ Mark answered, almost bewildered by the suddenness of the question and the way it was put. ‘My grandmother always believed it *was*. He never denied it to her.’

‘No, he never denied it, because he was the pluckiest chap and the staunchest I’ve ever clapped eyes on,’ rejoined Paul vehemently. ‘He never denied it, because he

wouldn't get other folks into trouble ; because he was ready to run any risks for his friends. I'll tell you what, Mark,' he added, leaning forward with both his hands on his knees, his grey eyes fixed on the young man's face and his voice husky from strong excitement, 'I see you don't believe me, but I'll *make* you. I'll tell you what I've never told yet to mortal man ; I hit that blow. It was I who ought to have been in the dock, and not your father. There, the murder's out now ; and I'm glad of it, for it's been like a clog tied to my leg this many a day.'

Amazing, utterly unlooked for as was this confession, it never for an instant occurred to Mark to doubt it. Something in Paul's manner to him, and in his allusions to his dead father, had always struck him as mysterious and incomprehensible ; and now that the clue was put into his hand, he was able to interpret it. But he sat motionless, regarding Paul with an intent breathless gaze, waiting for the next word he might utter.

'I don't ask you to keep it dark,' Paul

went on hurriedly. ‘You’re not the chap I take you for if you would be willing to bring harm on an old man; and if you meant to do it, no asking of mine would stop you. I’m at your mercy; but it could not do anyone much good if the truth did come out now.’

‘No,’ said Mark. There was a rising bitterness within him, but he had not been able to realise it yet. ‘You are quite safe, I think; but I want to know how it all happened. I want to hear the whole truth.’

‘I’ll tell you; I’ll make a clean breast of it,’ Paul said slowly; ‘there’s no use in keeping anything back from you now.’

In his inner heart he was already beginning to repent a little of his rash confidence, to reflect upon the hazard of his act. Again and again during the last few weeks he had been inwardly prompted to make this revelation; but caution had always prevailed until to-night, when, on a sudden impulse, he had blabbed out the secret of his life. But the deed was done now past repair, and, looking

at the dark earnest face before him, he said to himself that he was in safe hands. Mark would never tell—there was too much of his father in him.

' You know how it all came about,—the fight at the inn, I mean ? ' he asked.

Marked nodded. ' Yes, I have heard about that.'

' Well, the rascal had got hold of your father, had him tight by the throat, and in another moment he would ha' been down. I saw it, my blood was up, we were all half mad with drink and quarrelling ; and I was pushing up to them, when, as ill luck would have it, I caught sight of the bludgeon hanging up against the door, and in a twinkling I had grabbed it, and had hit the fellow a crack on the back of his head to make him loose his hold. It was all done before you could have said ' Jack Robinson,' and I'd let the bludgeon drop, and he was lying there on the ground for all the world like one dying or dead. I hadn't a thought of hitting so hard, that I'll swear ;

and I was scared enough at what I'd done. But for that matter so was everyone. No one had seen me do it, we were hustled so close together—no one, except your father. I'd seen him looking straight at me, over the other chap's head, as I struck the blow. He never looked at me again, but kept his eyes on the ground, and he never spoke a word, till, just as they were going to fetch the police, he managed to get close to me, and muttered under his breath without so much as turning his head—"Keep quiet; get away when you can." Well, after they'd taken him I slunk off, and nobody tried to stop me. I was a coward, you'll say; and so I was, but it was no joking matter to have damaged a man like that. It meant being sent beyond seas for the remainder of one's days, or maybe hanging if he shouldn't pull through. I thought, when I was clear away and out of reach, Bob meant to let out who had done it, and that he was safe enough to get off scot free, being such a smart quick-witted chap too. If I hadn't felt cock-sure of that,

I'd never have gone. If I'd known how it would turn out, I'd have come back and given myself up. I planned to do that if things went wrong with him, and I would have done it too.'

He stopped and looked across at Mark as if expecting some response, but none came. Mark had laid aside his pipe long ago, and was sitting with his chin supported on his two hands, his eyes now fixed on Paul's face, now on the smoke curling slowly up the wide chimney.

'So I went back home,' Paul continued, 'across the hills, and told my wife that I was bound for Plymouth on business that might keep me some time. She wasn't much surprised. She was used to my coming and going at short notice, and I fancy sometimes she was rather glad to be rid of me. By midnight the next day I was on board ship, and two months later I was driving a car about New York.'

'And my father,' said Mark, looking round at him, '*he* was in prison.'

'Yes,' said Paul, wincing at the tone, quiet

as it was, 'I know well enough what you are thinking, and I can't say you're wrong. It was a mean trick, to save my own skin and leave him to bear the blame; but how should I know how it would all turn out? I hung about New York. I would not go off to the backwoods, though I'd a good offer made me, till I'd got a letter from home to tell me how it had gone with him; and I wrote both to my wife and to an old mate of mine at Althorpe for news. My wife never wrote back at all, and it was a long time before I heard from the other, though I'd begged him to let me have a line at once. When he did write at last, it was to tell me that Robert had been tried and found guilty, but that he had died in prison before his sentence could be carried out. Ah, well, you may think I'm a hardened old sinner, but I could almost have knocked my own brains out when I got that letter, to think that I'd left him in the lurch. He'd never peached. My mate said that if I was keeping out of the way because of

that night's row, I might just as well come home. No one but Bob had got into any trouble about it. To this day I can't understand why he didn't speak out, or get some one to send me word.'

'I can,' said Mark abruptly. 'He knew he was dying, and that you were not. He did not remember what she—my grandmother would have to bear.'

'I meant at first,' proceeded Paul, 'to go back and brave it out. I thought about it day and night for a week. I'd have borne a deal to clear him, but then he was dead, and would know nought about it; and his mother had always been stuck up and looked shy at me; and my own wife had said that I should go to the Boar's Head once too often, and I fancied she wouldn't be over sorry to find her words come true; so at last it ended in my staying out there and holding my tongue. And now, lad,' he added, breaking off impatiently, 'tell me that I'm a villain and a blackguard; call me what names you like, but don't look at me like that.'

'What's the good of calling names?' asked Mark, with the shadow of a smile on his lips. He was thinking of his childhood and youth, darkened by an unmerited reproach. He was thinking of the hard battle he had fought in trying to wipe out that same stain. He was thinking, above all, of something worth the whole world to him, which he had lost through this man's baseness. If his name had been clear in men's eyes; if this cloud had hung not over him, he might have claimed Freda without any wrong before he ever left Hamelford, before she had met Stephen; and he *knew* she would have had him then. It *might* have been; that was the sharpest pang—so sharp that it drowned for the time all memory of his injured father, of his unhappy grandmother.

Paul's next words, however, recalled them both to his mind.

'Don't you suppose that I didn't care for what he'd gone through, or that the thought of the old widow woman sat easy on me? Many's the time it's all come before me

when I've been dropping off to sleep of a night, or felling trees by myself in the forests. I think I took more than ever to drink and play from that time that I might get rid of it; and at last it did begin to wear out, and left off troubling me much. I should have carried it to my grave, I suppose, if I hadn't come across you. But, lad, I may be a bad one, and yet, for all my talk and bluster, I could have cried like a baby that day when I brought you home from Hamelford. It seemed to me almost as if it had been Robert himself come to life again to say he'd forgiven me. I knew then I should tell you about it sooner or later, and I've been precious near it a score of times before this. He was such a generous chap! He'd have forgiven me long ago if he'd been alive. He knew I never thought of doing him any hurt when I made off. Can't you say so much as one kind word to an old fellow that's truly sorry for the harm he did to you and yours? Can't you forgive him, as your father would have done?'

It was Paul Chace all over, in his selfish recklessness as to others' pain if it could save his own, in his wilful blindness to the claims of honour and of duty, as well as in the dash of honest contrition and warm-heartedness which coloured his lower nature, and did something to redeem it from utter worthlessness.

'Yes, I can forgive you,' Mark said, not however without suppressed contempt in his low tones. 'It wouldn't mend matters to bear you a grudge now. It wouldn't comfort my grandmother, or undo any of the mischief that's been done; and as for my father,' his eye brightened with more of gladness than there had been in it for many a month past, 'a man who could play the part he did, wouldn't be the one to wish me to bear malice now. And I have gained something by what you've told me to-night. It's worth a good deal to be able to glory in my father.'

Paul's head drooped somewhat. He was not unconscious of the strong contrast between

his conduct and that of the man who at such heavy cost had shielded him from punishment, and he was anxious to say something that might soften his own blackness.

'I'd done your father one or two good turns in my day,' he explained. 'If he were here to speak he'd tell you so. I'd gone out of my way to serve him more nor once. He'd nothing against me before that time.'

But Mark was not dwelling just then upon Paul or his doings. His thoughts had taken another turn, and a flood of new emotions was surging within him. *He* might be proud indeed. He might raise his head, conscious that his name and birth were free from shame, and that he could, as he had said, even glory in his dead father. But the shame had lighted elsewhere—on her who was dearer to him far than his fair fame, on her whom he had guarded, whom he would ever guard so far as he could from every breath of blame or suffering. And if this night's talk had proved *his* father very noble, what, on the

other hand, was hers? If his heart beat with triumph in learning the generous silence of the one, it would well-nigh crush her to the ground if she should ever learn the treacherous silence of the other.

So, as Paul finished speaking, Mark leant forward his bright eyes full of a new anxiety.

'Promise me one thing,' he said impetuously. 'Promise me that no one shall ever know this that you have told me—above all, not Freda. It is the only amends you can make me now.'

His petition took Paul wholly by surprise. He had begun to have sundry qualms lest the demand might be the other way; lest Mark should insist on his father's name being cleared, even now, at the eleventh hour. He might refuse, of course; he might deny his own words, spoken as they had been before no second witness, but he would rather not have this to do, and he hardly knew *how* he should resist the young man's urgency. And then there were some awkward facts which, pieced together, might

tell heavily against him if the story he had related once got abroad.

There was an evident relief mingled with the amazement in his face as he answered Mark.

'Promise you? Of course I will. It isn't very likely, if you come to think of it, that I should be for spreading it about. I should soon make this place too hot to hold me, if I haven't done so already. You might ask me to do something a deal harder than that, my lad, and I wouldn't say you nay.'

'But,' insisted Mark with undiminished earnestness, 'you might be caught unawares. You might let it out in your talk, as you did to me. Swear to me that you never will — that you won't so much as hint to Freda that you were there when it happened, that you'll never even talk to her or to any one of my father, if you can help it, lest you should be led on into saying too much.'

And Paul swore it, with much inward marvelling.

'That's well,' said Mark, drawing a deep

breath. ‘And now I must go home to Linford. I can’t talk any more just now. I must think ; I have a great deal to think about.’

Paul let him out at the back door almost in silence. He was subdued, abashed for the time, and Mark’s pardon had not been altogether consoling to him. His own acts had never taken such ugly shape as now, when he saw them with Mark’s vision. And yet he laid his hand on the young man’s arm entreatingly as he was about to depart.

‘ You’ll come here still sometimes, won’t you ? You won’t turn the cold shoulder on me, Mark, because of what I’ve told you to-night ? There isn’t a living soul but you and Freda that would lift so much as a finger to help me if I were at death’s door. Those fellows over at Moriston are all but ready to set on me now ; and they will, as soon as I’ve come to the end of my tether. I’ve pretty well done for myself. But you won’t shake me off, will you ? for I don’t know how to spare you.’

Mark could not feel either pity or kindness for him just then, but he answered steadily,—

‘No! this will make no difference so far as that goes. I’ll come here just as I have done; and if I can lend you a helping hand in any way, I will. You may be sure of that. And we need never talk of this matter again: it will be better that we should not. Good-night.’

‘Good-night,’ echoed Paul, and watched him go, and then put up the heavy door-chain and drew the bolts and went upstairs to bed, hardly knowing whether he was glad or sorry that he had at last unburdened his conscience.

‘He’s a rum chap,’ he muttered to himself, ‘and there’s no knowing what to make of him. I wonder why he made me give that promise. I’ve got a notion in my head that, for all his queer silent ways with her, he’s a fancy for my Freda. There was an odd look about him to-night when he spoke of her that meant something, or I’m much mistaken. I wish she’d take to him. If she were off my hands, I’m not sure but that I’d cut and run. And yet I don’t know.’

And meanwhile Mark was striding homeward through the darkness alone with his tumultuous thoughts. He had done what he could for her. She should never know, so long as he could hinder it, what manner of man her father really was. No cruel fingers should ever point at her; no cruel taunts ever sting her, as they had too often stung him. If her heart must ache for her father's reckless folly, if she must blush to see him come home muddled with drink, or sigh as she watched him going off to some race-course or cock-fight, at least she should never have to loathe the baseness that had led him to desert his friend. From that pang, at least, he had been able to save her. For he had little or no fear that Paul would be tempted to break his newly-made vow. It seemed to him, as was indeed the truth, that the self-betrayal of this evening had been prompted partly by a special compunction at *his* ignorance, and partly by a superstitious craving to obtain some kind of absolution from the living son for

the injury done to the dead father. The same craving, indeed, which had led Paul from their first meeting to hold out a friendly hand, as if by a welcome to him now he could atone for that deep wrong of former days.

No! he need have no fears that Paul Chace would further proclaim his own double dishonour. But now his mind began to be torn by a doubt whether, in his supreme care for Freda, he was doing a fresh injustice to the memory of the father who had already endured such cruel usage at all hands; whether he had any right to seal Paul's lips, or was not rather bound himself to proclaim the truth and justify the dead. Yet, as he dwelt upon it, it seemed to him as if he knew that father with the strange intuition of a kindred spirit—as if he could guess how the man who in his worst extremity could still be so loyal to an unworthy friend, would have freely chosen that his name should be held disgraced rather than that a grievous evil should fall on an innocent girl. And

since this silence could bring pain and harm to no living creature but himself, he was surely free to keep it. But even as he so decided, he acknowledged inwardly that had it been otherwise, had his grandmother been yet living, he would still have done as he was doing now. Before all things to him—before his tenderness for her, before his duty to his father's memory—came his regard for Freda and her peace. And he knew that if the still small voice within had bidden him do her any hurt, he would have found its leading wellnigh too hard to follow.

But no! his way was plain; and it might be that the knowledge he had gained would give him a stronger hold over Paul than he had yet possessed. If he could arrest him on his road to ruin—if Freda learnt by slow degrees to trust him and lean on him as in that blessed bygone time she had been used to do, then the sweet affection which she had once borne him, and which had been so roughly trampled under foot, might yet

revive again—if only that other love, those other hopes, did not for ever stand between them. He was in the deep sandy road leading straight down to Linsford beach; he was walking slowly, absorbed in his musings. As he came in sight of the red cliff and the single row of cottages that formed the little fishing village, all showing faintly in the pale light of the crescent moon, a new thought flashed into his brain. If by some unlooked-for chance the truth were ever to become known, then indeed the bond between her and Stephen would be snapped for ever, past repair. Then, in her loneliness, her humiliation, she might be willing to take refuge at his side, to give him his heart's desire. The evil vision came tempting him; but it passed, leaving him unshaken. Not, if he could win her to-morrow, would he purchase her at such a price. Better to go on yearning for her day by day through all the years that were to come, than gain his happiness by her misery and abasement.



CHAPTER XXII.

'I am sick of the moor and the main.'

THE cutting March winds had given place to the soft rains of April, and in the Melcombe woods and the lanes about Hawkstone the ground was already gemmed with violets and blue bells and the pale pink blossoms of the wood anemone. Even up on the exposed heights around Lion Point the yellow flowers of the sea cabbage were beginning to open out, and tufts of samphire were to be found scattered thickly in the cracks and crevices of the cliffs, so that Freda would gather handfuls of it as she wandered about through the fresh bright afternoons, or as she sat,

book in lap, in some sheltered cranny high up among the rocks, protected as need might be from sun or wind. Saving the slow change in the seasons, no change had come in her life. Her days were spent mostly in solitude; for if her father chanced to be at home, there would generally appear before very long one or other of those slouching disreputable figures she knew so much too well, and whose very aspect she had learned to dread. She rarely, however, saw them now, except at a distance. Long ago all her old visions of reforming her father had melted into air; and she had been careful to keep clear of these men since one morning, when Ned Gleig, not too sober at the time, had presented her with a sprig of flowering blackthorn; and Mark, who chanced to be standing by, had taken it from her hand without a word and tossed it over the wall. For though he said nothing, she knew by his face well enough that he thought such a gift from such a giver was an insult to her, and in her secret heart she thought so too.

Mark was still there, spending his days at sea, or in Paul's company on shore. He went and came as he chose, without any sort of invitation; and he and Freda had outwardly become, as she had proposed to him, 'good friends.' Good friends in a strangely undemonstrative fashion. They spoke together of the doings of the passing days, of the few events that happened in the country district, and now and then more seriously and earnestly about her father. From those talks Freda never clearly gathered how far Mark shared her father's tastes, still less why he lingered on in that remote place. Now and again some word that he let drop raised in her a wonder that he should find any satisfaction in the life he led; but if she hinted this, or suggested, as she sometimes did, that for his own sake he would be better away, the rigid look that she had learnt to know would settle down upon his face, and he would answer always in the same hard tone, 'that one life suited him as well as another, and that for the present

he'd a mind to stay.' He dared as yet throw no clearer light upon his motives, give no other clue to the end and aim for which he had been willing to sacrifice the good repute he had hardly earned, and league himself with rogues and vagabonds. Once already in his rash impatience he had ventured too far, and his repulse had taught him caution. But yet he thought that in her secret heart she must know quite well why he had exchanged his chosen calling for this lonely hill-top—this vagrant life. She must know that his old feelings, old wishes, *could* not die while he himself lived. And by degrees she did divine that there was an unspoken reason for his presence there. Whatever it might be that had driven him from the north, whether or no he had left behind him there a Scotch lassie fair and false, and with her all his high hopes and intents, she grew to believe that there was, beyond and beside, another cause keeping him now near Lion Point, and that she herself was that cause.

To her those lengthening spring days were very weary, very hard to bear—hardest of all, perhaps, when the sky shone brightly and all nature was gay with reviving life. From time to time she wondered, with a kind of desperation, whether no deliverance would ever come, whether she would rise every morning with the same sick fears, and lie down at night exhausted with the long ceaseless tension of the day. Save for her Sunday walk to Linford Chapel, she never went beyond the moors or beach. Mrs. Horne had, indeed, several times hospitably invited her to spend a day at the farm-house; and once, to please her father, she had gone. But it was a noisy disorderly place, with people of all sorts coming and going; and it was no false excuse when she pleaded afterwards that it had tired her out, and told him that she was better at home.

A very little tired her now, though she did not often own it. A steadfast purpose had braced her when she first came to Lion Point; but now a reaction had set in, telling

both on mind and body. Yet she was brave still, and tried to do her part. She could mostly summon a cheerful greeting for her father ; she strove to make his home comfortable and to be thrifty with his money ; and she had an ear ready for such of his troubles and concerns as he chose to tell her. And if her patience did not always stand the hard tests it had to endure, if now and then a word of gesture or reproach escaped her, Paul himself admitted that the marvel was rather that she bore so much than that she should sometimes fail to bear. Yet he neither knew nor guessed half the load that lay heavy on her soul ceaselessly fretting and oppressing her. He lived in the present, and for the most part troubled himself little about the future and the past.

‘Take it easy,’ he would say, looking in her face ; ‘that’s the way to get through life ;’ and except when he chanced to be, as he himself expressed it, ‘down upon his luck,’ he carried out his own precept. For something of his power of taking it easy,

Freda, when she was very sorely tried, was often fain to long. But if it was not given to her to learn that art, she had at least the skill to hide her burdens, to speak calmly while her heart was aching, to smother her sighs and check her tears. She never now sought a refuge in the darkness and silence of the cave upon the beach. Perhaps she dreaded that if she once gave way her power of self-control would be altogether gone. And she needed that self-control—how much she only knew. Rarely as it forsook her, there came one evening when it proved of no avail.

They had just finished supper, and were still sitting the three of them together, talking of a fishing-boat that had been wrecked on a stormy night a week before making for Hamelford Pier. The lamp had been set upon the table, but it was burning dimly, and threw an almost spectral light upon the three strangely-contrasted faces. Paul was getting to look almost an old man now. He had not lost his ruddy colouring, but

there were many more white hairs in his head, and wrinkles on his brow, and little trace was left of the jovial rollicking air he had worn six months before. And yet the alteration in him was less striking than in the two who sat face to face on either side of him. Mark might easily have been taken for a man of thirty instead of three-and-twenty. The lines about his face had grown so hard, the mouth so sternly set; and Freda, always pale, seemed to have blanched even to the lips of late, and in her worn and restless aspect there might be read a tale of wakeful nights and painful days. But though her features had sharpened, and her cheek had lost its roundness, no one who had known her of old, looking at her now, could have denied that she was fairer far than in her early girlhood, and that those weary eyes, into which there would come sometimes such a strange piteous wistfulness, had a beauty of their own far beyond any that mere bloom could bestow.

'And so,' said Paul, continuing the narrative he had been giving, 'they tried to put her head right for the steps; but somehow they just missed them, and fouled the pier-head instead, and the boat went to pieces like a nutshell, as they told me.'

'But the men were saved,' said Freda.

'Ay, but they'd tough work to bring one of them to. He'd been in the water so long before they could get to him. The doctor was pretty nigh an hour getting him round, and his wife standing by wringing her hands all the time.'

'Dr. Burkett would bring him round if anyone could,' Mark observed. 'He's had plenty of practice in that line, and he's a clever fellow and knows what he's about.'

'Maybe,' said Paul carelessly. 'I don't know much of him. They say his daughter, the young lady with the yellow ringlets, is going to be married—to Stephen Redgrave out at Hawkstone.'

He brought the last words out with a jerk. He had thought so little lately of

his daughter's former life that he had literally forgotten the concern she had in Stephen till he was in the very middle of his name.

A dead silence followed for a moment. Mark's eyes had flashed one earnest glance at Freda, and then meeting hers, had dropped again upon his plate. He dared not trust himself to speak; but she soon spoke as composedly as if it were some idle gossip in which she had no interest.

'She is a pretty girl, Nelly Burkett; I remember her well. She used to ride about on a Shetland pony beside her father years ago.'

In mute amazement at her calmness, Mark's eyes again sought her face. Was it really whiter than it had been five minutes before? or was it the flickering lamp that cast upon it such a ghastly hue? Only concerned just then to spare her, he struck in—

'Dr. Burkett rides a neat little chestnut mare now. I saw him trotting through Moriston on her the other day, and noticed how well she went.'

‘To be sure,’ said Paul, glad to have the conversation diverted to his favourite topic. ‘He bought her at Storleigh fair, gave a round price for her, too—Ah! What’s the matter?’

Freda had risen to leave the table, had walked quietly half-way across the room, and had fallen to the ground in a dead faint. They lifted her up with hardly a word, and threw some water over her. Even Paul expressed no wonder at her sudden illness. Blind as he generally was to all that did not immediately affect himself, he thought that he could read the cause of her swoon plainly enough in his own blundering announcement. ‘What a thick-headed fool I was!’ he muttered to himself, looking down at his daughter’s unconscious face; while Betty, hastily summoned, was trying to revive her. ‘Why couldn’t I have kept my jabbering tongue still! ’

Mark heard him, but he made no reply. He had drawn a little back, and left her to her father and the old woman-servant. The next minute, however, he

stepped forward again, and whispered huskily to Betty—

‘Shall I go for the doctor? I could bring him back in an hour’s time.’

‘No; there’s no need. See, she’s coming to. But it’s been a terrible long faint, whatever brought it about;’ and she glanced suspiciously from Mark to Paul.

Neither answered her, for both were looking at Freda. Her eyes had opened, then languidly closed and opened again. She sighed once or twice, and tried to sit up.

‘There, my pretty lamb,’ said old Betty, tenderly supporting her. ‘You’re better now. You’ve been a bit giddy like, but you’ll soon feel yourself again. You’d best let me get you into bed at once.’

Mechanically Freda tried to rise, but her limbs failed her, and she sank back. Her father put his arm round her.

‘I’ll carry you up,’ he said gently and kindly. ‘There, that’s right; we shall manage so’—and he stooped to lift her.

But Mark stood without moving hand or

foot—stood so until the father's heavy tread was heard crossing the room above with his burden. Then he turned to the window, and resting his clasped hands upon the sill, hid his face upon them. Betty had carried off the lamp, and the room was quite dark. He was alone. No one saw the bitter tears that wetted his cheeks, or heard the long groan that broke from his lips. In that hour all the strong man's strength had left him. Presently he heard Paul coming downstairs, and went out to meet him in the passage.

'She's better now. · She says she shall soon fall asleep. I wonder what could have possessed me to blurt out that fellow's name. 'Twas that upset her. But who would have thought she cared about him still ?'

Mark made no reply, and Paul went on—

'I almost wish he'd married her, for all I owe him a grudge. I never thought she'd pine after him. She carried it with such a high hand at first. I wish I'd left her alone, and stayed on t'other side of the world. 'Twould have been best for her and for me too.'

Perhaps he expected to be contradicted, but Mark only said, rather absently, that he must be going home—he'd have to be up and about by four o'clock the next morning. Paul did not urge him to stay. It had occurred to Mark lately that he was not quite so keen for his company as of yore; but to-night he did not notice this in his anxiety to be gone.

Quite late the following afternoon he came up again to Lion Point. It had been a hot June day, and the parlour window was wide open; but when he looked in, he saw that the room was empty. He hesitated a little, and then went round the side of the house to Freda's garden. He knew she was sometimes there at this hour, and there he found her now. She was standing half hidden by a clump of spurge laurels, pulling down a long trailing shoot of bryony that twined with its vine-like leaves and delicate tendrils above her head. She had on some sort of pale-lilac gown, and in her left hand, which was hanging down by her side, she

held a few lilies of the valley. That was the picture that he saw in the afternoon sunlight as he leant over the little wicket-gate that led into the garden. The next minute she turned her head and saw him. She looked a little more hollow-eyed than usual, but there was no other change about her, and she smiled as she nodded and bade him good-day.

‘Are you all right again?’ he asked, not moving from his position at the gate.

‘Quite right, thanks. I gave you a fright last night, I’m afraid. I always thought it a stupid thing to faint, but I fancy I must have gone rather too long without food, and I’m not sure how many miles I had not wandered along the beach. It was so bright that I was tempted on, and forgot the heat.’ She spoke rapidly, as if to make all possible excuse for herself.

‘May I come in?’ Mark inquired, not directly replying to her explanations.

She looked surprised at his thinking it needful to ask permission, but assented at once and rather hurriedly.

'To be sure you may, if you have nothing better to do.'

He unlatched the gate and came up to her where she stood. She saw from his manner then that he had something to tell her. It must be about her father surely, but she did not ask him any questions, she only said,

'Father has been out since the morning. He won't be in for another hour at least.'

'I know; I did not expect to see him.'

His low strange tone struck her ear, and in a sudden access of nervousness unusual in her, hardly knowing what she did, she held out her lilies.

'Are they not lovely? Will you have one?'

He took it from her hand and held it, while he went on forcing himself to speak quietly and clearly.

'I came up here this morning to see you. I had a question to ask you. Freda, we have known each other a long while. We used to be fond of each other once. Will

you take me for your husband as we settled in those days—when we were little children?’

How strangely different were those words from the ones he had been used to frame to himself a year or two back in his Greenock lodging, in his ship cabin, in his midnight watch on deck! *Then* he had meant to pour out all the fervent long-suppressed love of his soul. And *now* even to himself his speech sounded as if he scarcely cared whether she said him yea or nay. And yet each one of those slowly-uttered syllables had been conned over in the past night with an intense anxiety. He dared not plead for her love when he knew, alas! too well, that it had passed for the present beyond his utmost reach. He dared not even press on her his own, lest his very fervour should revolt and shock her. Had she not already known and scorned it? But if she would take him just as he had said, making no promise or profession, then a time might come, *would* come—he knew it—when he

should tell, and she would care to hear; how precious she was to him.

She stood quite still looking at him. Her face could not well be more colourless than it had been already, but there was a new expression in it. Once before that question had been asked her, and she had been long in answering it. She was no longer now; but her answer, when it came, was very different.

'No; I will not.' The words had a strange ring in them. 'How can you dare even to ask me? Do you think that all I want is a husband—any husband? Do you think that I am ready to give myself away, here, there, and everywhere; that I am so weak and helpless that I cannot get through my life alone? I will show you that you are wrong.' The hand that held the flowers was trembling very much, but there was no quiver in her passionate voice.

Mark looked at her—at her shaking hands—at her face.

'I know that you have been cruelly used,'

he said. ‘I know that I would try all a man can to use you well, to make you happy.’

It was not what he had intended to say, but a man staggering under a heavy blow cannot well weigh his words.

‘I have *not* been cruelly used,’ she retorted vehemently. ‘I might have been Mr. Redgrave’s wife long ago if I had given up my father. If I cannot be his wife now, if he has made his choice elsewhere, it is my own doing—all my own doing. I know,’ she added with bitter irony, ‘why you have said this to me to-day. You saw me ill last night. You think I am broken-hearted, and you are ready to console me. You may have meant well—I don’t know; but you have made a great mistake. I don’t need either you or your pity.’

She moved as if to go, but he put out his hand to stop her.

‘You need not be afraid. I have quite done. You will hear no more of this. When we meet again we will both have forgot-

ten it. I daresay it won't be very difficult,' and he laughed harshly.

Just then her eye fell on the flower she had given him, and she held out her hand for it imperiously.

'Let me have it back. I would never have given it you if I had known—if I had guessed what you were going to say. Let me have it back.'

For an instant there was a look about Mark's face as if he would have refused to yield it. Then he changed his mind and returned it to her.

'Tell me one thing,' he said, speaking with an unnatural calmness: 'do you love him as much as you did? Has even this—that you heard yesterday—made no difference to you?'

She looked at him like a creature at bay.

'What right have you to ask?' she breathed out. 'What right has anyone to ask me that?'

'It is true,' he said, 'I have none;' and then he turned away and walked slowly back

to the wicket gate. But before he opened it he stopped, and, facing round, addressed her once again.

'As you said, I meant well. I hope, remembering that, you may be able to forgive me.'

His eyes rested on her a moment as she still stood where he had first seen her among the bushes, her light dress contrasting with the shining green leaves, the drooping sprays of the bryony almost crowning her uncovered hair, and the fleckered sunshine dancing through the foliage all around her. She had looked at him for an instant when he spoke, but had made no movement or reply; and she was watching now, not him, but a great green dragon-fly that was sailing by. So he left her, and passing into the dark cold shadow of the house, went blindly on until he found himself at the cliff's edge. Then scrambling down a little way, he cast himself prone upon a patch of turf, screened from above by an overhanging shelf of rock, and lay there motionless, as

he had lain once before beside the beacon on St. Mary's Head.

It seemed to him just then as if she had struck him dead—dead as far as any spirit or energy was concerned. He had thought that he had little hope when he climbed the hill from Linford that evening; but he knew now that he had been wrong—knew it by the blight that had fallen on him since. He did not regret any word that he had said or left unsaid to her. He did not wish that he had urged his cause more ardently. Not all the words that ever were spoken—so he told himself—not all the prayers that ever were breathed, could have availed him anything against that crushing contemptuous indifference. He felt no resentment towards her. If her taunts had stung him into a momentary bitterness, that had died away, and had left only deep compassion when he recalled her wan face, her agitated movements. But, oh! it was cruel to feel this pity for her, and to be able to do nothing—nothing. To see her life and his laid waste, and to know

himself powerless except to suffer as she suffered.

The sun had long set when he arose and groped his way upward again to the top of the cliff. As he looked towards Lion Point, he saw the gleam of the lamp behind the red curtains in the parlour. Was she there with her father, or was she too keeping a sad watch alone upstairs, thinking maybe of bright-haired Nelly Burkett?





C H A P T E R X X I I .

'He moved through all of it majestically—
Restrained himself quite to the close—but now——'

'**H**E must be cleared up, and I must do it. There's no one else.' Mark was pacing slowly up and down the market-place of Hamelford waiting for Paul, who, having gone off somewhere for five minutes, had stayed away a good half hour. He was not thinking of Paul, however, but of some words of his just before they parted.

'I shouldn't wonder if I had got hold of the wrong end of the stick after all, the other day,' he had said. 'Will Slater will have it that it's not Redgrave or Hawkstone the Doctor's daughter is going to wed.'

'Who is it, then?' Mark had asked abruptly.

'That's more than I can tell, or he either. He stands out that it's some young spark from London way, but he don't seem to know much about it for all he's such a positive chap.'

'Will's gone off to Bristol, hasn't he?'

'Ay, he's come in for a legacy, he says. Maybe it's true, and maybe not. Anyway he don't intend to turn up here again just yet.' And then Paul had marched off, and had left Mark to his own thoughts.

'I must do it,' he repeated to himself in a brooding mechanical way; 'she mustn't be deceived. If he tells her what he's told me, she won't know what to believe, and she can't find out for herself.' He took two or three more turns, then stopped and leant against the old-fashioned sun-dial at the corner. 'I'd best go straight to young Burkett,' he decided at last; 'he used to be always ready to spin a yarn, and he's an honest lad. I'll ask him outright—it's no

good my trying to beat about the bush. I'm not clever at that game, or at any other for that matter.'

It was only crossing to the chemist's shop at the opposite side of the market-place, where Ned Burkett was sure to be found behind the counter making up pills and potions. He was a dull clumsy fellow, too stupid ever to make a figure in the world, as his father said; and so, while all the doctor's spare cash had been spent upon his two dapper elder sons, Ned was told that he must be content to succeed to Mr. Parson's business when the old man should die; and being easily satisfied, had made no objection. He looked up now with a goodnatured grin as Mark entered the shop. There were not many people in Hamelford who would have greeted Mark after that manner, but Ned had always had a kindly feeling for him.

'Want some physic?' said he cheerily. 'You look rather down in the mouth. I'll mix you a pick-me-up in a twinkling that will make another man of you.'

'You may if you like,' said Mark, 'but you must find out my complaint first, for I don't know it myself.'

'Well!' said the other looking wise, 'I should say it's a complication. That's always safe. But see here, there's stuff on these shelves will cure all complaints, from love downwards.'

Now was Mark's time. 'Talking of love,' he said, hastily striking in. 'They give it out in the town here that your sister is going to marry Mr. Redgrave of Hawkstone.'

'Mr. Redgrave! Pooh, nonsense,' Ned returned. 'Why, she's been engaged this month past to a London lawyer, with a fine City business. Met him at my aunt's house at Kensington, where she's been paying a long visit. To be sure, she and Stephen Redgrave were carrying on a bit at one time, but there was never anything in it. She was always a flirt, my sister Nellie, but there'll be an end of all that sort of thing now, for she's to be married this autumn.'

'I see,' said Mark. 'Well, give me my draught if I'm to have it, for I must be going. I'm on the look-out for a friend.'

'But you haven't told me what ails you,' protested the other; 'how am I to doctor you without knowing that?'

'Give me something to make me sleep sound. I've taken to dreaming too much of late.'

Ned laughed. 'You're a rum card. Here —we'll try what this will do for you. It won't kill you if it doesn't cure you.'

Mark hardly waited to have the phial filled and sealed, and his indifference about the remedy was so patent that a sharper observer might easily have seen through the lame artifice; but Ned was not quick at putting two and two together, and he did not even remember Freda Chace's existence.

'What a mighty hurry he's in!' was his only mental comment, as the sailor slipping the medicine into his pocket left the shop.

But, in spite of his hurry, Mark had

forgotten all about Paul when he got outside, and it was only quite by chance that he stumbled on him coming out of the 'Three Crowns,' not quite so sober as when he had parted from him last. He managed with some difficulty to lure him out of the town, and to get him home. He himself had not seen Freda since he had left her that afternoon, three days ago, standing in the sunshiny garden. He did not see her this evening. When he had watched Paul turn in at his own gate with a fairly steady step, he hastened on across the hill to Linford. He would have no present need of the draught Ned had given him, for he was going to spend the coming night not in bed, but on the sea.

That still silent fishing in the solemn darkness suited his mood just then better than anything else could have done. The boy he took to help him in managing the boat had been deaf and dumb from his birth, and did not disturb him. The night was calm, with only just wind enough to fill the brown

sail and take them out. The moon hung like a copper ball in the dark heavens, and a few stars were faintly twinkling between the dim feathery clouds. The boat rose and fell noiselessly on the long slow swell, and the two figures in it sat motionless as statues, save when it was needful to handle the nets or throw the mackerel into the baskets at their feet. Presently the moon grew bright and golden, and they lay in a broad pathway of shimmering light. The little lad, sitting aft near the helm, dropped asleep now and then for a few minutes; and Mark, leaning over the side, watched the nets and the moving waters, and pondered many things. Once there would have been to him something almost awful in that midnight hush and solitude; but now it only soothed and strengthened him. There, in that rocking boat, with the dark ocean and the silvery radiance around him, he seemed to be in a calm majestic world where agony and passion might hardly enter, and he saw his true course with a clear unfaltering vision.

The dawn was nearly breaking when they turned the boat's head back again to Linford, and before it was broad day they had run her ashore on the sandy beach. When Mark sprang to land he had made a fixed resolve. It remained still to be seen whether he had the steadfast courage to accomplish it. Hardly waiting to snatch a scanty meal, he started for the moor. A few minutes brought him to the crest of the hill, and to the rough footpath which led along the cliff to Lion Point. But he was not bound thither: his business this morning lay at Hawkstone. He had calculated the distance, and knew that he should reach the farm somewhere about nine o'clock, when, he imagined, he was tolerably certain to find Stephen at home. He would not run the chance of missing him by going later. What he had to do must, if possible, be done at once, while the power was given him to do it.

It might have been a pleasant walk on that fresh morning in the early summer over

the open breezy moorland, all gay with tall purple foxgloves and golden broom, sending out its rich fragrance into the air around, with the sheep browsing on the short fine turf till they raised their heads and scampered off at his approach, and with the lark carolling its sweet song high above him. But summer sights and sounds and scents were wholly lost on him just then. He strode along so rapidly that it wanted still twenty minutes to nine by the Hawkstone church clock when he passed through the village, and turning in by the stable entrance made his way round to the back of the house. The maid, who was standing at the kitchen door duster in hand, looked in some slight surprise at the dark tanned sailor, but admitted him without demur, and taking him across the hall to Stephen's private room shut him in there, while she went to find her master. Mark had been doubtful for a moment whether or no to send in his name, but she had asked for it and he had given it. He was left alone long enough to take in all the

small details of the room and its contents ; and in this terrible moment of suspense his mind seemed roused to an extraordinary quickness of observation. He noted the bright spurs, the silver-headed hunting-whip, the cricket-bats and fishing-rods, which bore witness to Stephen's outdoor pursuits. He glanced at the titles of the books, English, French, and Latin, ranged along the walls ; at the prints hung above them, and at the centre table covered with notes, pamphlets, memoranda, samples of grain, and artificial flies ; and he realised as he had never done before what a different life this man led from his own, what a different life his wife would lead. What had he—rough ignorant Mark Cameron—to put in the scales against the riches and the book-learning, the dignities and pleasures that Freda might find here ? And yet he loved her. It was hard to give her up. He was standing before a framed photograph nailed above the mantel-piece, surveying the well - favoured countenance, every feature of which still lived in his

memory, when the original came into the room. Looking at him fresh from the portrait, Mark saw at once that some of the smiling content had left the face, and that Stephen Redgrave too had known trouble since that likeness was taken. His manner was civil and even gracious, however, as he bade Mark be seated, apologised for keeping him waiting, and sat down himself.

Mark, however, chose to stand.

'I shall not trouble you long,' he said in a voice which, to an acute ear, might have told of great agitation very resolutely suppressed. 'What I have got to say is very soon said. I daresay you may not remember me.'

'Indeed I do, perfectly. I have seen you twice before. Once, when you stopped my horse, and the second time,' he continued with some constraint, 'in the avenue yonder,' nodding toward the window. 'I think then I invited you to come on here.'

'You did, and I refused. I should not have come now, I should not have been

at all likely to put myself in your way again, if it had not been for the errand that has brought me.'

'And what may that be?' Stephen asked, with a shade of impatience in his voice.

'I will tell you. You must pardon me if I speak too plainly. I don't know how to pick and choose my words.'

'Never mind,' returned the other. 'I'm not apt to take offence, I hope. Out with it.' But he still looked ill at ease.

'I must first ask you a question. Is it true, as I have heard, that you would have married Miss Chace if she had been willing to give up her father?'

At the sound of Freda's name Stephen's colour rose. He had begun to think vaguely that this visit might have some sort of reference to her; but he had not imagined the fellow would dare to broach the subject so bluntly.

'It may be true or not,' he said haughtily; 'but if it were, may I inquire how that interests you?'

'I am living at Linford, not far from Paul Chace and his daughter. I see her often. I don't know what is in her mind about you; but I know that her present home is no fit one for her. If it is only her father who stands between her and you, I would undertake that he should be on his way back to Australia in a very few weeks' time.'

Mark spoke with a firm distinctness that startled even himself. Yet it was no conscious effort to him. He was lifted in this instant beyond the realm of pain.

'Is *that* what you have come to tell me?'

'Yes, it is.'

Stephen had risen, and was leaning against the mantel-piece, balancing a pipe between his fingers. He stopped to blow some dust off it before he replied very deliberately—

'I am not sure that I quite comprehend your meaning. Are you suggesting to me that, if I choose to ask Miss Chace a second time to be my wife, you would step in and remove the former hindrance, her father?'

'That *is* what I meant. I know—no one

on earth could know better—how strange a thing it is to suggest, how lowering to her it sounds. But I made up my mind that it was worth doing, if it gave her even a chance of being happier and better cared for than she can be now.'

'Are you so much concerned about her happiness?' Stephen asked dryly. A latent spark of jealousy, a very tiny spark in the days of his courtship, was kindling now into a flame.

'I have known her as long back as I can remember. We were playmates once. She has neither mother, sister, nor brother; she has hardly a friend in the world. I can't see her life spoilt without trying all I can to help her. I knew no other way of helping her than this.'

Something in the man's simple earnestness, in the natural dignity which his abrupt bearing could not hide, inspired Stephen against his will with a kind of respect. When he spoke next it was with less formality.

'Supposing—which, of course, I don't admit—that I were inclined to close with your offer, I don't quite see how you would carry it into effect. From the little I've heard of your friend, Paul Chace, I should have fancied that he was not quite so easily managed as you make him out to be.'

'I have some mastery over him,' Mark replied calmly. 'I believe—I am sure—that I could get him away from this place now. Later it might not be easy; it might not even be possible.'

'You mean, I suppose,' said Stephen, smiling ironically, 'that he might then be in other custody than yours—lodged, for instance, within prison walls. That would rather seem to be his present ambition.'

'I did not only mean that. My power over him is not so strong as it was. I can't tell how long it may last.'

'And you?' asked Stephen, looking hard at Mark, 'you would go with him to look after him?'

Mark met the look steadily, but it was not instantly that he replied.

'Yes! I should go with him. There is nothing to keep me in England.'

He would have said more, but he could not proceed just then. The part he had set himself was beginning to be well-nigh beyond him. There was a contest too going on in Stephen's breast, though he allowed no sign of it to be perceived. His pride—quite another sort of pride than Mark's—resented the notion of any guidance, any interference at the hands of this low-born sailor. And yet he knew and felt that on this hour much might hang for weal or woe. Mark's offer had opened a way, the only way by which he could hope to gain the one wife he still desired. He had meant to do without her; but these months had been teaching him very plainly that he could not loosen her hold upon his heart so easily as he had thought. And he could have her still. Say what he might, Mark would never have come upon this mission if he had not known very surely that Freda was still faithful to him. If he took her now, it

must be, indeed, with all the added discredit her wretched father had cast upon her; but then, on the other hand, he would be rescuing her from that father—from the miserable life she had so rashly chosen.

There was a long silence in the room. Through the open window came the soft monotonous sound of the scythe and the sweet smell of newly-mown grass. Now and then a cow lowed in the meadow, or a rook cawed from the neighbouring elm trees. Within all was still save the fluttering leaves of an open book upon the windowsill. The two men stood opposite each other, Mark's gaze rooted to Stephen's face—Stephen himself looking down absently at the meerschaum pipe with which he had been toying.

Suddenly he raised his eyes to Mark's. For the time being his pride had gained the day.

'Are you waiting for an answer? Do you expect me to tell you offhand whether I need your aid in winning Miss Chace?—

whether indeed I care to win her at all ?'

Mark's hands clenched themselves involuntarily, but he struggled hard, very hard, for self-control. Had he not known beforehand how sorely he would need it ?

'I cannot make you answer me in words against your will.'

This was all he said.

Perhaps it was some passing expression in the dark face, perhaps only the silent working of his own mind that impelled Stephen to speak again with a more generous candour than before.

'I do care for her. Though men don't generally publish their affections to all the world, I am ready to tell you so much as this. But I have no more to say—I can make no kind of pledge to you. I must manage my own affairs for myself—I must act as I judge best.'

'I don't ask any pledge,' Mark returned, in the steady tone that he had tried, and not in vain, to maintain throughout. 'I have

done what I came to do. If you want Paul Chace to leave Lion Point and England, give me a token. I shall be found at Linford, and I engage that he shall go. I engage it now. In a little while it may be too late.'

He had moved as if to depart, when Stephen said quickly—

'I need hardly ask. Miss Chace herself knows nothing of this visit of yours?'

Mark faced about with a flash in his bright eyes which almost startled the questioner.

'Do you think it likely?' he broke forth. 'Is it the kind of thing I should choose to tell her? You must know little of her if you think she would have let me come as long as she had strength to stop me. No one knows, no one will ever know, why I have been here, unless—' and then, as a sudden suspicion crossed him, he added almost savagely—

'*You* will not tell; you will not be mean enough to repeat what I have said to you

to-day. It would half kill her if she ever came to know it.'

'No!' said Stephen, with a scornful smile that contrasted strongly with the other's fiery tones; 'you may be quite at ease on that point. I am *not* mean enough to repeat what has passed between us to her or anyone. And now, good morning.'

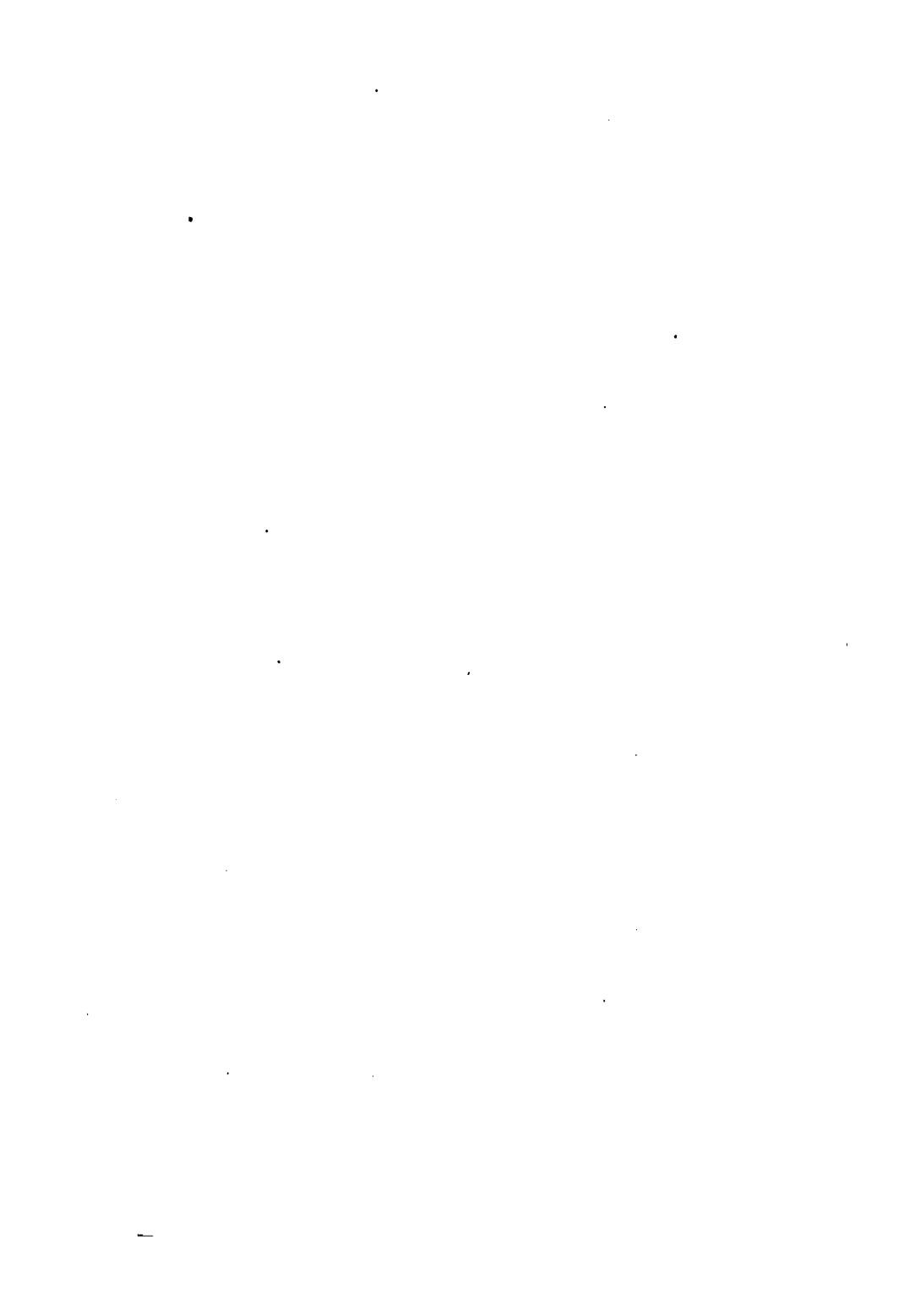
But his farewell remained unanswered, for Mark turned and left the room without uttering another word. It was time, indeed, that he went, for he felt as if at any minute he might be tempted to strike that man with his comely looks and his smooth contemptuous manner. He knew how different *he* looked. He knew how ill he could assume that unconcerned demeanour which the other wore so lightly to mask his inner mind. Well, it was all over now, and he had come away without so much as learning whether he had failed or succeeded in the mission which had brought him there. But of this, at least, he was very sure, that he would sooner have been adrift on a raft in

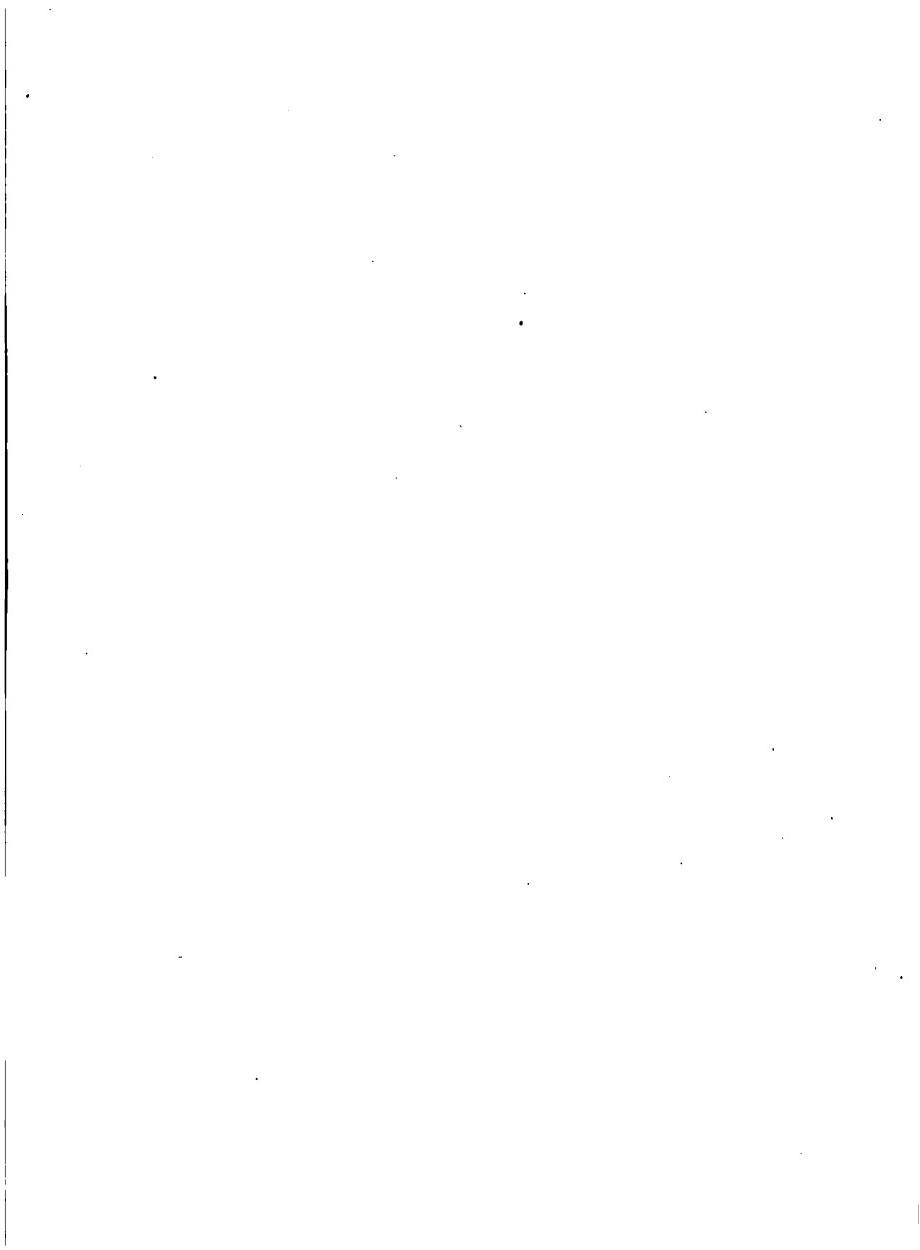
the stormiest sea that ever rolled, than have faced that interview with Stephen Redgrave. As he stooped down beside the brook to lave his burning brow, and moisten his dry lips in the running water, he asked himself passionately whether he had wasted his great suffering, humiliated himself, and far worse her, in vain. He ground his teeth at the bare recollection of Stephen's measured accents and cautious expressions. He said to himself that it would be almost better for her to die than to be mated with that heartless self-satisfied fool. And yet all the while he knew that he was unjust, and that Stephen was neither heartless nor a fool. Nay, that in most of those qualities which go to win a woman's love and admiration, he would stand high above Mark Cameron. And it was for these very qualities that Mark hated him just now with a deadly hatred. They had gained for him the great treasure of Freda's love. But what right had he to that treasure? He had said that he cared for her, and it might be that after his poor

fashion so he did; but yet he had not chosen even to give up for her his paltry pride. How much less would he have been ready for her sake to blast his whole life, to give her up of his own free will and deed to his rival and his enemy! And then into Mark's convulsed soul there came a faint throb of exultation as he recalled his morning's work. Thus far he at least had kept the vow he made when first he came to Lion Point. He had proved that to serve her he would indeed do and bear anything and everything. And so it should be still. He would not think about Stephen Redgrave. He dared not. He would not think about himself. Only and entirely of *her*. If the token of which he had spoken should be given, he would not wait to make moan over his own doom, but would strain every nerve to purchase for her the happiness she pined for; the home where she would be, at any rate, protected from injury and insult. And then—then afterwards, he would face his own wretchedness as best he might.

Whether the token *would* be given, whether his love would be put to this extremest test, he could not tell. He could only pray that, if it were to be, it might be soon.

END OF VOL. II.





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